

The
**HARDY
BOYS**



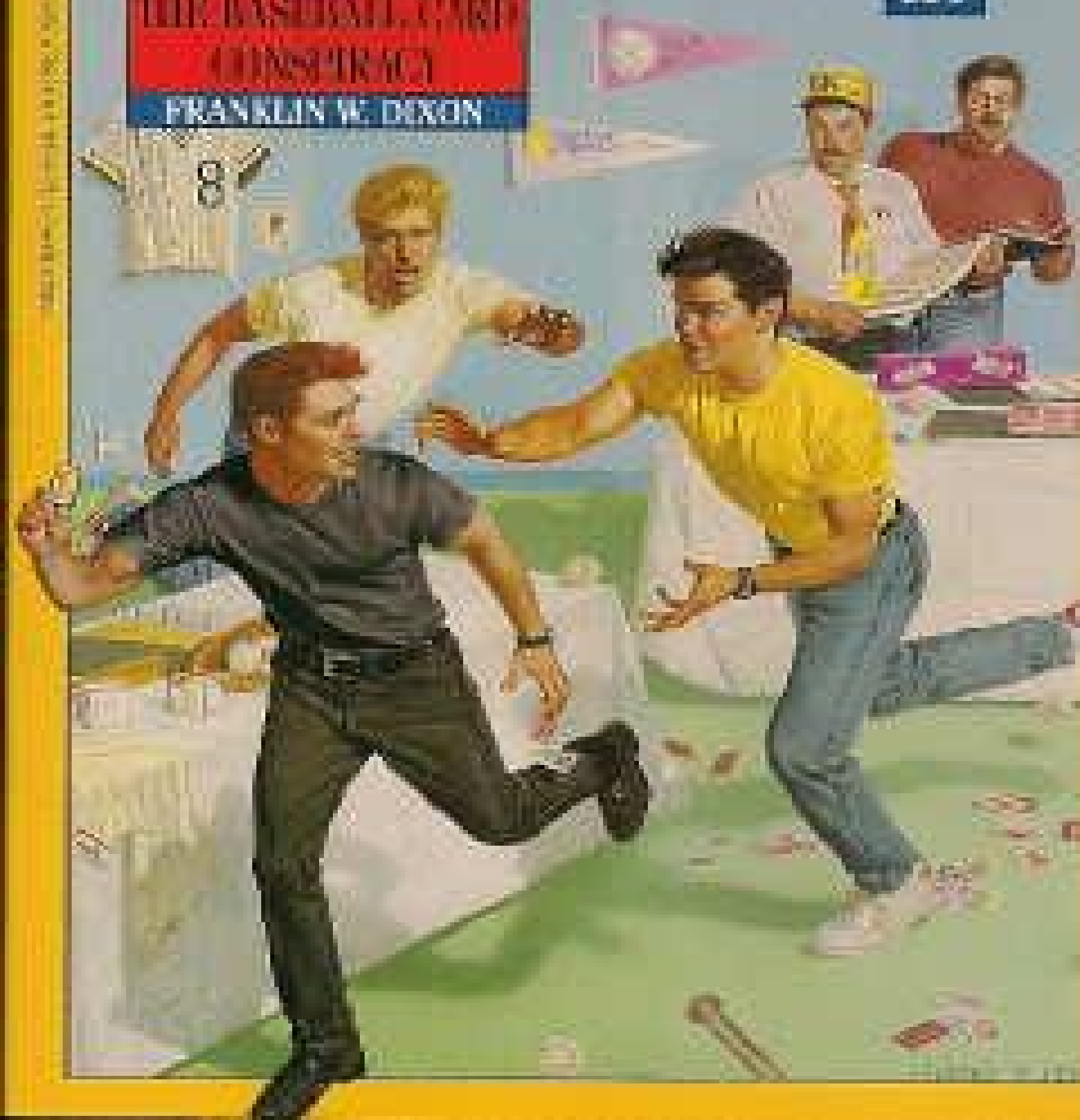
**THE BASEBALL CARD
CONSPIRACY**

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

ALL-NEW! FIRST TIME PUBLISHED

WHEN CRIME TAKES THE LEAD,
FRANK AND JOE
COME OUT SWINGING!

117



Hardy Boys Mystery Stories - 117

The Baseball Card Conspiracy

By

Franklin W. Dixon

Chapter 1

Take a Card

"Hey, Frank! Check out this baseball card!" Joe Hardy called to his eighteen-year-old brother, Frank.

The older Hardy was standing two booths away, trying on a rare Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap. Their tall, lean, blond friend, Biff Hooper, was next to him. The three boys were attending a huge baseball card and memorabilia show that took up the entire floor of New York's biggest convention center.

Looking around, Joe figured it would take at least two days to see the stuff at every booth. The floor wasn't just packed with booths, either. So many people had come to see the baseball cards on display that Joe had almost lost track of Frank a few times.

"This has got to be the biggest baseball card show I've ever seen!" Biff practically shouted.

"Me, too," Joe agreed. He handed Frank a card protected with plastic. "It's a 1973 Brooks Robinson. I got it for three dollars."

"What a deal," Frank said, taking off the cap and pushing his dark hair off his forehead. "Especially if it included the bubble gum."

Biff laughed and punched Frank playfully on the shoulder. "Get with it, Frank," he said. "Most baseball cards don't even come with gum anymore."

"I knew that," Frank said, making a face.

"Sure you did," Joe said, laughing.

Before Frank could pass the card back to Joe, Biff snatched it from Frank's hand. "This is a quality card, Joe. The corners aren't damaged, and the picture doesn't have any hickeyes."

"Hickeyes?" Frank asked.

"Imperfections," Biff explained. "In fact, if this card weren't printed just a bit off center, it would be considered mint."

"What would it be worth then?" Joe asked, taking the card back from Biff.

Biff looked around the packed floor. "A lot. And all these people would be willing to pay for it, no matter how much it cost."

"I didn't realize baseball memorabilia was so big," Frank said.

"There's a ton of money to be made in baseball cards," Joe said.

"No kidding," Biff said. "I figure at market prices some of my cards have gone up three hundred percent over what I paid for them. Like the one I got here today. It only cost me ten bucks, and there's a good chance it will go higher some day."

He held up a clear plastic box with a baseball card inside.

"It's Don Mattingly. I've been looking for it ever since it came out."

"Ten bucks isn't much," Joe said. "What makes you think it will go up?"

"According to the price guide I use, every card is worth more as the years go on," Biff said. "The guy I bought it from even had a Hank Aaron for seven hundred."

Joe brushed his blond hair out of his eyes while he scanned the convention floor. It was funny to see so many people so serious about collecting baseball cards. For him, it had always been just a hobby. Still, it was pretty exciting to think that there were some rare, cool cards to collect - and that he could find them here.

"I'm glad Dad brought us along," Joe said, stepping out of the way of some people who wanted to see what the booth in front of him had to offer.

Fenton Hardy had come to New York City to do some legwork on an investigation he was conducting. Since Frank and Joe weren't busy, Fenton asked them to come along and help. It wasn't the first time Frank and Joe had assisted their father, who was an internationally famous private detective. The Hardys were crack detectives themselves, and Fenton often asked for their help and advice.

"Is the case super secret?" Biff asked.

"Not really," Frank said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "A new high-definition computer printer was stolen from DupliTec, a company in Bayport. The chief executive officer at DupliTec, a guy named Victor Newton, hired Dad to find the printer. DupliTec's patent on the printer is still pending, and Newton is afraid whoever stole the machine might beat DupliTec to the market."

"So if we didn't have to come here to help Dad track down his leads," Joe concluded, "you might never have gotten your Mattingly card."

"Actually I might have," Biff pointed out. "I bought this from Bayport's Pasteboard Palace. They've got a booth here. Back home I visit the shop almost every week, but they didn't have the Mattingly when I was in there the other day."

"I bet they bought it from someone here," Frank suggested.

"Could be," Biff said as he scanned the floor eagerly. "Hey," he said, pointing to one of the larger booths one aisle over. "Come on. I think I see something I've had my eye on for a long time."

"What's that?" Joe asked, hurrying to keep up with Biff as he edged his way through the crowd.

"A baseball autographed by Bob Uecker," Biff replied. "You know, that old player who does all those commercials."

The Hardys followed Biff to a double-sized booth marked by a large banner heralding the company's name, Baseball Diamonds Are Forever, and its New York address.

"I take it the Pasteboard Palace doesn't carry Bob Uecker's autograph," Joe said to Frank.

"You looking for a Uecker?" interjected a thin man in his late twenties who wore wire-framed glasses. He was standing behind a table covered with baseball cards, old World Series programs, and baseballs. "You've come to the right place. I've got the only authentic Uecker autographs at this show." He handed Biff a signed baseball in a box.

"Have you ever actually seen Bob Uecker's signature?"
Frank asked Biff.

"Hey!" the man snapped. "I don't sell phony memorabilia."

"He wasn't saying you did," Joe put in quickly. "It's just that the average person might not know what Bob Uecker's signature looks like."

"You're absolutely right," the man said, nodding several times. "For all you know, everything in this booth could be phony. That's why you have to buy from someone you trust." His hand shot across the table. "Name's Forest Rader. I've been a dealer for ten years."

Frank and Joe both shook his hand.

"I personally saw Bob Uecker sign that ball at a show over in New Jersey," Rader said, looking at Biff and making his pitch. "I paid him to sign ten of those and a dozen eight-by-ten glossy photos of himself. This is the last of the baseballs."

"What do you want for it?" Biff asked.

"Thirty-five."

Biff's eyebrows shot up as he looked at the man. "That's a lot," he said.

"You've got to be kidding," Rader said, taking the ball back from Biff. "Uecker's signature is going nowhere but up. You'll double your money in no time."

"Then why don't you hold on to it?" Joe asked.

"I've already got one," Rader said with a smile. "In a safe deposit box."

"I'll give you twenty," Biff offered eagerly. Joe could tell that Biff was having the time of his life at the show. He enjoyed haggling over the prices of the items as much as he did owning his favorite pieces.

"Can't do it." Rader shook his head. "No less than thirty."

While Biff thought it over, Frank asked to see the autographed baseball. Taking the ball from Rader, Frank strolled over to the end of the booth.

Joe edged up next to him. "What's going on?" he asked.

Frank studied a photograph on the table in front of him, then the signature on the baseball. "I just wanted to check and see if the handwriting on this photograph of Bob Uecker," he said, "is the same as the signature on the baseball."

"Of course they're the same!" Rader insisted. The dealer had followed Frank to his end of the table. "I told you, I'm an honest man."

Excuse me." A silver-haired man standing next to them turned to face Frank and Joe. "I myself can vouch for Mr. Rader's honesty."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Baird," Rader said. "That means a lot, coming from one of the foremost collectors of baseball memorabilia."

"Are you by any chance the Elliot Sanford Baird from Bayport?" Joe asked.

"I am," Baird replied, his black eyes looking directly at Joe.

"Mr. Baird's entire house is filled with memorabilia," Rader explained. "His collection rivals that of the Hall of Fame."

"You're too kind," Baird said modestly.

"I've read about you in the Bayport paper," Joe said. "I'm Joe Hardy, and this is my brother, Frank. That's our friend Biff. He's the real collector."

Baird shook hands all around. "I was at the show where Bob Uecker signed that baseball, and that most definitely is his handwriting. But you're right to be suspicious. There isn't a lot of phony memorabilia, but to those of us who love the hobby, even one bad baseball card is cause for alarm."

"You mean people have actually forged autographs?" Biff asked.

"They certainly have," Baird said sternly. "In recent years many counterfeit baseball cards have also turned up."

"Really?" Joe asked.

"More than you might think," Rader said, shaking his head. "There was a phony Bo Jackson rookie card in circulation a couple years ago. A lot of people got taken on that one - even dealers. Mr. Baird here is an expert in detecting counterfeits. Aren't you, Elliot?"

Baird smiled slightly. "Well, yes, I suppose I am."

"Can you tell if my Brooks Robinson card is phony?" Joe asked, handing the card to Baird.

Baird put on a pair of glasses, then took the card and held it under a lamp that illuminated the Baseball Diamonds Are Forever merchandise. After studying the card for several

seconds he announced, "It's genuine," and handed the card back to a relieved Joe.

"I paid ten dollars for this Don Mattingly," Biff said hesitantly, handing Baird the card.

"Ah, yes," Baird said. "A popular card."

Holding the card under the lamp, Baird turned it over several times, then asked Biff if he could remove it from its case.

"Is something wrong?" Frank asked.

Baird peered closely at the card, holding it to the light. Then he took a magnifying glass out of his inside coat pocket and looked at the card even more carefully. Finally he handed the card and the case back to Biff.

"What's wrong?" Biff asked. "Did I pay too much?"

Baird cleared his throat and removed his glasses. "I don't know how to tell you this," he said gravely, "but I believe the card may be counterfeit."

Biff gasped.

"How can you tell?" Frank asked.

"There are ways," Baird explained.

"Bad logo?" Rader asked knowingly.

Baird nodded. "Baseball card companies take pride in making sure their logos can't be copied. They use special colors and extremely high resolution in the printing," he explained. "Also, if you can see through the card - that is, if the photograph appears on the other side - chances are you

have a counterfeit. I'm afraid the logo on your Mattingly isn't printed with the right color."

"So I got taken?" Biff said in disbelief. "I feel like such a fool."

Baird patted Biff on the shoulder. "You needn't," he said. "A number of collectors I know were fooled by the Bo Jackson card. My advice is to take the card back to where you bought it."

"If you'd bought it from me," Forest Rader said, "I'd give you a refund."

Looking disappointed, Biff stared at the counterfeit card.

"We'll just go over to the Pasteboard Palace booth and ask for your money back," Joe said.

As the Hardys and Biff were thanking Baird for his help, Joe noticed a red-haired man rudely push his way past them.

Before Biff could react the man had grabbed the Mattingly baseball card out of his hand and started running toward the exit.

"Hey!" Frank shouted. "That guy just stole your baseball card! Let's go get him!"

Chapter 2

The 5:07 to Trouble

Joe Hardy leapt into action. The guy's red hair was easy enough to spot in the crowd. The fact that he left a trail of overturned tables and flying baseball cards behind him made it even easier.

"I'll cut him off at the exit!" Frank shouted, racing ahead of Joe.

"Stop that guy!" Biff yelled as he joined the chase.

Joe lost sight of the red-haired man for a split second when he disappeared behind a throng of people at a busy table. Suddenly the thief reappeared near the exit. Joe put on the speed, dashing through the crowd in the direction of the main doorway.

When he was no more than twenty feet away from the door Joe heard a scream. At the same time someone shouted, "Hey, what's the big idea?"

Joe pushed his way through the crowd and found himself standing right in front of the red-haired guy. An older man had the thief pinned against the doorway, but the red-haired guy was struggling to get free. Joe saw that Biff's card was still clutched in the red-haired man's left hand.

Before Joe could react the thief had scrambled out of the older man's grasp and was about to slip out the doorway. Without wasting another moment, Joe made a diving grab. He caught the thief's right ankle, pulling him to the floor.

"Let go of me!" snarled the red-haired man.

"Hold on, Joe!" Joe heard Frank call out. "We're on our way."

Apparently realizing he'd lost the chase, the thief flipped Biff's baseball card toward Joe, then kicked out viciously with his left leg. The blow landed squarely on Joe's jaw and made him lose his grip.

The red-haired man scrambled to his feet and raced out the door. Joe lay on the ground, holding his jaw. Frank and Biff arrived moments later.

Several people in the crowd asked Frank if they needed help, but when Frank shook his head no the group started to disperse. Frank knelt by his brother. "You all right?" Frank asked Joe.

"I'm fine," Joe said, sitting up.

"I can't believe we lost him," Frank said under his breath.

"I'll go after him," Biff said, and ran off.

"That guy threw Biff's card down somewhere," Joe said, looking around the floor.

"I've got it right here," a voice said.

Frank and Joe looked up to see the card in the hand of Forest Rader. "Let me help you," Rader said. He held out his other hand to pull Joe up, then he passed the card to Frank.

At that moment Biff came jogging back into the hall. "I lost him on the street," he said.

"I'm sorry I let him get away," Joe said, rubbing his chin. "But he really distracted me by throwing the card away."

A security guard came rushing over, his walkie-talkie squawking. "What's going on here?" he asked. "I got a report of some trouble."

Frank quickly explained to the guard what had happened, and that they had gotten Biff's card back. "Everything's fine now, but maybe you could keep an eye out for the guy. We'd like to find out why he wanted my friend's card in the first place."

The guard nodded, spoke into his walkie-talkie, and finally took off when they'd convinced him Joe was okay.

"Why do you think that guy tried to steal my card?" Biff asked after the guard left.

Frank rubbed his chin. "I think I remember him standing in the crowd at the Diamonds booth while we were talking with Baird."

"If he was that close and heard Baird say it was fake, it's all the more confusing," Joe said.

"I can tell you right now he wasn't anybody from the business," Rader said. "I know most of the dealers, and I've never seen him before."

"Maybe he was just some nut." Biff shrugged. "Let's forget about it and go over to the Pasteboard Palace booth so I can get my money back."

While Rader went back to his table, Biff led Frank and Joe across the convention hall toward the Pasteboard Palace booth.

"The manager is Nora Shadwick," Biff explained as they made their way through the crowded aisles. "Her store's got

the best selection in Bayport."

When the three boys approached the booth Joe saw a man in his middle twenties sitting behind the table. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a jersey from the Bayport Blues, Bayport's minor league baseball team.

"Hey, guys, this is Cecil Corbin," Biff said. "Cecil works for Mrs. Shadwick. These are my friends, Frank and Joe Hardy."

"You're not the same Cecil Corbin who played for the Bayport Blues, are you?" Joe asked excitedly.

"One and the same," Cecil said. "Pleased to meet you both."

"You had a great fastball," Frank said.

"I still do," Corbin said glumly, "even though none of the owners seem to think so."

"Are you retired now?" Joe asked.

Corbin nodded. "At the ripe old age of twenty-five," he said bluntly. "The team put me on injured reserve, but after I went through surgery on my elbow they decided they didn't want me at all."

"That's their loss," Frank said. "But you can always coach."

"You're right about that," Corbin said, smiling.

"In the meantime, I'm working some of the shows for the Pasteboard Palace. How can I help you today?"

Biff handed Cecil the fake Mattingly card. "Elliot Sanford Baird told me this card is counterfeit," Biff explained.

Corbin exploded. "That old fraud! I wouldn't believe a word that crook says. He's the one who owns the Bayport Blues, you know. He lied to me while I was recovering. He said, 'No problem, Cecil. As soon as you're ready, you're coming back to the team.' Then he cut me."

"That's a rough break," Joe said diplomatically, "but Baird seems to know his baseball cards."

Corbin studied the card. "Looks all right to me. You're telling me you think Nora Shadwick sells phony cards?" he asked coldly.

"Not at all," Biff replied. "I've bought a lot of cards from her. She could have been fooled by it. A lot of people are fooled by counterfeits."

"Well, she's not here now," Corbin told them. "She's already left for Bayport. I can't give you any money back without her say-so."

"Do you have any idea how she got the card?" Joe asked Corbin.

"I don't know," he answered. "Both of us bought some cards here. She probably got it here at the show, because I don't remember us having this card in the shop a few days ago."

Frank checked his watch and saw it was almost time to meet his father. "We've got to catch up with Dad at Grand Central Station," he pointed out. "First thing tomorrow we can go downtown to the Pasteboard Palace. I'm sure Mrs. Shadwick will want to straighten out the problem."

"If Nora wants to give you back the money," Corbin said, "that's up to her. But if it were up to me, I'd say let the buyer beware."

The Hardys thanked Corbin and headed out of the convention hall.

"Cecil Corbin sure is a bitter guy," Joe said as they stood on the street searching for a cab. "Not to mention the fact that he seems to have no use for Elliot Baird at all."

"He's not being fair," Biff said, shouting over the noise of rush hour traffic. "Anyone who plays sports has to know that even one injury can ruin a career. Corbin was a good pitcher while he was healthy, but he never bounced back after his surgery."

Frank managed to get a cab to stop for them, and all three friends piled into the backseat. "Grand Central," Frank said, leaning forward to instruct the driver. He checked his watch and looked at the traffic jams around them. "I hope we make the train."

Joe held on to the front seat as the driver swerved out into traffic, nearly sideswiping a bicyclist. "I have a feeling we will," he said, his eyes wide.

Ten minutes later Frank, Joe, and Biff climbed out of the cab. While Frank paid the driver Joe looked for his father. Finally he spotted Fenton Hardy getting out of a cab.

Joe jogged up to him. "How's the case going?" the younger Hardy asked his father.

Fenton greeted his sons and Biff. "Let's just say I hope you had better luck trading baseball cards than I did following leads," Fenton said. "I'll tell you all about it on the train."

Joe and his father led Frank and Biff into Grand Central Station. They hurried down the stairs to track level and

boarded the commuter train to Bayport. Minutes after they got on board the train began to move out of the station.

Frank found four seats together, two on each side of the aisle. "I want to hear all about the case," Frank said, "but since we haven't had anything to eat since noon, I thought I'd run back to the club car and pick up some chips."

"Sounds good," Joe said. "Grab me a hot dog while you're at it, okay?"

Frank nodded and started making his way to the back of the coach. As he opened the door leading to the passage between cars he heard the rhythmic noise of the train on the rails, which was louder since there was a gap where the cars connected. He could see the houses and countryside fly by as the train sped along.

Just then another passenger came up behind him. Frank held the door open for him and stepped across the connecting walkway toward the club car door.

Suddenly Frank felt his arm being wrenched from behind in a hammerlock. He struggled, but before he could pull himself free his assailant had an arm clamped around Frank's neck.

Reacting swiftly, Frank hooked one leg around his attacker's leg and tried to pull the guy off balance. But the man easily sidestepped Frank's maneuver and tightened his grip.

"I know all about you and your brother," the man growled into Frank's ear. "If you know what's good for you, leave the baseball card business alone."

Frank could hardly talk with the man's arm constricting his neck, but he managed to croak, "I'm not in the baseball card

business."

Feeling for an instant that the man had loosened his grip, Frank summoned his strength and backed up, slamming the man against the door of the train. The man groaned but didn't give up his grip. Instead he held on to Frank's neck, keeping up the chokehold.

Suddenly the guy let go of Frank, and Frank spun around to face his attacker. Frank got one good look at the guy and saw with a shock that it was the same red-haired thief from the baseball card show.

Before Frank had time to react, the red-haired man lowered his head and, like a linebacker, plowed into Frank. He grabbed Frank at waist level and pushed him backward, toward the gap between cars.

As all the wind was knocked out of him Frank realized his assailant was about to push him from the train. The only thing separating Frank from the speeding blur of ground below were two chains. His attacker would have no trouble pushing him over them.

In the next second Frank felt himself being forced backward over the chains, headed right for the rails that were whizzing by.

Chapter 3

The Sky Is Falling

Just before he fell Frank reached out desperately. He had only a split second in which to save himself from falling off the train. In the last moment his fingers found a handhold on the outside of the train car.

Gritting his teeth, he swung his feet up and landed on the floor of the car. The train was moving so fast that just holding on to the handle gave him searing pains in his arms. His shoulder felt as though it was being torn from its socket.

Frank tried not to look down. The ground shot by at what seemed like a million miles an hour. Grabbing the side of the car, he climbed over the chains and then steadied himself against the lurching motion of the train.

Gasping for breath, Frank struggled back into the car's vestibule.

By now the red-haired man was gone, of course. Frank raced into the club car and scanned its occupants. His assailant was not there. Moving quickly back into the car where Joe and the others were seated, Frank told them about the attack.

"It was the guy from the card show," Frank said. "I'm sure of it. He was trying to adjust my itinerary."

"Unless he's willing to jump from a moving train," Joe said, "he's still on board."

"Let's fan out," Fenton suggested. "Biff and I can take the back of the train. You boys take the front. That way we can make sure we get a good look at everyone."

Frank and Joe immediately started toward the front of the train. "Mostly business people and students," Joe said under his breath as he made his way up the aisle.

Once Frank had reached the end of the train he turned and started back toward Joe. "I don't see anyone who looks even remotely like him," Frank said.

"Maybe he jumped after all," Joe said.

"Or else he's in disguise," Frank suggested. "Let's look everyone over again on our way back."

Frank led the way through the swaying railroad cars. He stopped beside a man in a window seat. The man was wearing an Atlanta Braves baseball cap and a pair of reflective sunglasses.

Hearing the faint rhythmic snoring that meant someone was sound asleep, Joe gave his brother a questioning look.

"I can't tell," Frank whispered. "That cap is hiding his hair."

Suddenly the train jerked, then began to slow. The conductor called out the town of Sea-view Bluff.

Frank watched the man in the baseball cap. "That guy's out," Frank decided. "The change in the train's motion didn't even faze him."

Joe nodded. "Let's see if Dad and Biff came up with anything."

"No luck," Fenton Hardy admitted when the group met back at their seats. The train jerked noisily to a stop. Out the window Frank saw the guy in the baseball cap getting off the train. He gave the man a close look but couldn't tell if he was the guy who had thrown him off the train or not. He wasn't wearing the same jacket as the man who attacked Frank, but he could have put it in the knapsack he carried. He didn't seem to have red hair, although it was hard to tell, since he was wearing a baseball cap.

"What you have to do is find out who printed Biff's counterfeit card," Fenton told the Hardys. "That's the secret to why this guy is after you."

"Dad's right," Frank agreed. "There's got to be something more at stake than Biff's ten bucks. That guy wanted to steal the card so we wouldn't be able to do any more investigating."

"He must have overheard your names at Rader's booth," Biff said. "How else would he know you guys are detectives?"

Joe nodded in agreement. As the train started up again he turned to Frank and said, "I say we get to the Pasteboard Palace first thing tomorrow morning. We've got to find out where Nora Shadwick got the fake Mattingly."

The next morning Joe steered the van down Packer Street in Bayport's waterfront district. He found a parking space several doors down from the Pasteboard Palace. The three friends got out of the van, careful to step around a yellow plastic ribbon that blocked off most of the sidewalk in front of an abandoned old store.

"What's this ribbon all about?" Frank asked.

"Watch your head," Joe told them. "I read in the paper that some molding fell off this empty building the other day. It missed hitting a pedestrian by inches."

"This is an old part of town, all right," Frank said, stepping between the van and the curb.

Biff led the Hardys along the street to the Pasteboard Palace. It was next to the abandoned building, with an alley in between.

A bell jingled when Biff opened the card shop's front door. There were already several customers checking out the cards in the rows of glass showcases. A man in a baseball cap and glasses was looking through a narrow cardboard box jammed with old baseball cards.

"Hey, Biff," a young woman in her late twenties said. "How did you like the show?"

"It was great," Biff answered. "I looked for you there, but Cecil said you'd already left."

The woman finished ringing up a sale and stepped around the counter. She tucked her short brown hair behind an ear and reached out a hand to introduce herself. "Nora Shadwick," she said.

Biff introduced Frank and Joe, who each shook Nora's hand. Her grip was firm, and she had a no-nonsense way about her.

"Oh, sure," Nora said, nodding. "I've read about your cases in the newspaper. Gosh, I hope you're not in here on business," she joked.

"Actually ..." Biff said, handing over his Mattingly card.

Frank stepped in for his friend. "We wanted to find out how and where you purchased this card," he said, explaining what had happened at the show the day before. He added that Baird claimed the card was counterfeit.

Nora's bright blue eyes went wide as she took the card. She reached over to the counter for a magnifying glass and examined the card in silence. Finally she let out a deep breath and looked at the three friends with a serious expression on her face.

"This card is counterfeit," Nora said. "I'm so sorry, Biff. I hope you don't think I sold you the card on purpose." She immediately walked to the cash register, took out ten dollars, and gave it to Biff.

"Do you know where you got that card?" Frank asked. "We talked with Cecil Corbin at the show, but he wasn't very cooperative."

"Cecil bought the card along with a large lot when he was working Thursday night," Nora said, shaking her head slowly. "Usually he's more careful about checking for counterfeits. Maybe he got sidetracked. Maybe I should have looked at them more closely, but I was pretty busy myself, setting up and all."

"You let Cecil buy for you?" Joe asked.

"I trust him," Nora said firmly.

"Did either of you sell any of the other cards you bought from that guy?" Frank asked.

"I didn't," Nora told him, "but Cecil might have. And the show's still on." She looked up suddenly. "Which means I'd

better call him. If those other cards are bogus and he sells them, my reputation as a dealer could be ruined."

She picked up the phone and made a call to Cecil Corbin. "I had to leave a message at the convention center," she told the boys when she hung up.

"Did Corbin say anything about the person who sold him the cards?" Biff asked.

Nora thought for a moment. "I really don't remember," she said. "But I'll tell you this: I want to find out who that person is and whether or not he knowingly sold me phony baseball cards." She looked from Joe to Frank. "You guys are detectives. Can you look into it for me?"

"No problem," Frank said eagerly. "Even if you didn't ask, I think Joe and I would have offered."

Joe nodded in agreement, and Biff slapped them both on the back. "All right!" he shouted. "The Hardys get another case."

The phone rang, and Nora stepped behind the counter to answer it. "It's Cecil," she mouthed to the Hardys.

While Nora spoke with Cecil Corbin in New York City, Frank browsed through the Pasteboard Palace. The shop was jam-packed with cards, team T-shirts, posters, sports trivia books, and collector supplies. Some of the browsers who'd been in the store when Frank, Joe, and Biff walked in had left, and still others had arrived. The Pasteboard Palace sure was a busy place.

"Call me back when you know whether those cards are still in stock," Nora Shadwick said into the receiver as Frank returned to the front counter. Joe and Biff were looking at a real Mattingly that Nora had pulled out for them.

"Cecil's going to pull the rest of the cards we bought in New York," Nora told the Hardys and Biff. "He's also going to check and see if we accidentally sold any other bad ones."

"Is there anyone who would want to try to ruin your business by planting fake cards?" Frank asked Nora, thinking about possible motives. Maybe one of your competitors wants to give you a hard time."

The store owner thought for a moment. "Not that I know of," she said finally. "I've always had a lot of repeat customers. I'm on friendly terms with all of the other collectors and owners."

"Nora runs the best shop outside of New York City," Biff said. "All the collectors know that."

"Whoever faked this card has some pretty good printing equipment," Joe pointed out. "I think we ought to visit a couple of Bayport print shops to find out exactly what kind of press would be necessary to produce this card."

The phone rang again, and Nora went to answer it. In a few minutes she hung up. "That was Cecil," she explained. "The good news is we didn't sell the other cards. The bad news is Cecil thinks two of them are counterfeit."

"Time for us to get to work," Frank said. "We'll let you know what we find out." He held up Biff's counterfeit card and said, "I know you bought this back from Biff, but do you mind if we take it?"

"No problem. And good luck," she said as Frank opened the door to leave the shop.

Frank led the way past the alley and the abandoned building onto the sidewalk next to their car. Suddenly, high above, a

scraping sound caught his attention. He looked up at the top of the empty storefront.

"Frank!" Joe yelled out. "Move out of the way!"

Frank looked up just in time to see that a huge chunk of limestone molding was falling from the building next to them. And it was plummeting right toward Frank!

Chapter 4

Down in the Dumps

Joe immediately hurled himself at Frank, knocking his brother out of the path of the falling limestone.

"What the - " Frank started to say. But Joe fell to the ground on top of him, muffling the older Hardy's question.

In another second Joe heard the crash as the chunk of stone came hurtling to the ground and crashed into hundreds of pieces.

"Frank! Joe!" Biff yelled. Joe looked up to see their friend standing in the street, safely out of the line of the falling molding. Biff was pointing to the top of the building, where a guy stood at the edge of the roof.

"Someone's on the roof!" Joe cried, helping Frank to his feet. "We've got to get up there."

Frank brushed himself off and quickly saw what Biff and Joe were talking about. "You guys go around to the back of the building," he said. "See if you can find a fire escape or something. There can't be too many ways down from that roof. I'm sure we can cut him off."

While Joe and Biff went around to the back of the abandoned building, Frank worked at getting in the front. All that was keeping the rotting door from falling off the frame was a rusted chain. Frank quickly broke the chain apart by taking a running jump and kicking in the door. Once inside, Frank hurried through the main showroom. Signs and debris told him it had once been a hardware store.

Finding the stairs, Frank raced up them two at a time. After climbing the second set he stepped out onto the littered tarpaper roof. The wind was brisk, and Frank zipped up his jacket and stuck his hands in the pockets.

The man was nowhere to be seen. Frank scanned the roofs of nearby buildings. The stores were close enough together for someone to jump from one store to another, but when Frank looked down the row of buildings he didn't see a soul.

Something shiny on the roof by the front wall caught his eye. Walking closer, he saw a plastic - handled screwdriver. He picked it up with a tissue to protect any fingerprints.

Frank looked over into the alley behind the building and saw Joe climbing up the fire escape.

When his brother got to the roof Frank gave him the bad news, "He got away," Frank said, kicking an empty can on the roof in frustration. "Where's Biff?"

"Keeping a lookout down in the alley. Did you see where he went?" Joe asked.

Frank shook his head. Then he handed Joe the screwdriver. "I'd say our man used this screwdriver to pry off the molding."

Joe nodded. "And I think I know why, too."

Frank looked at his brother curiously. "What do you mean?"

"The one glimpse I got of the guy, I saw he was wearing a baseball cap. I also saw some red hair peeking out of that cap," Joe said.

"Whoa," Frank said, letting out a low whistle. "You think it was that same red-haired guy?"

"It might be a coincidence," Joe responded, "but he did warn us against investigating the counterfeit card, and we haven't exactly taken his advice."

"Let's see if Biff saw anything down on the street," Frank suggested. "We've also got to find out if there are any prints on this screwdriver."

Frank led the way down the fire escape. Biff was standing in the alley when Frank swung himself off the ladder at the bottom of the escape and jumped to the ground. Joe was right behind him.

"Did you find the guy?" Biff asked, a worried expression on his face.

"Nope," Joe said.

"But I bet he's still in the area," Frank said. "Let's split up and do a quick search." He pointed toward the end of the alley, where it met the street. "We'll meet at that diner in half an hour."

Twenty minutes later Frank had scoured the area around the abandoned building and the Pastebord Palace. The red-haired guy was nowhere in sight.

"It's as if he just vanished," Frank told Joe when he and Biff showed up in front of the diner. "Into thin air!"

Biff held open the door to the place. A sign out front read Rube's Restaurant, and there were dozens of photographs of baseball stars hanging on the walls inside.

"Seems like everywhere we go we run into baseball fans," Joe said, scanning the walls.

"Nora mentioned to me that Rube is a friend of hers," Biff explained. "He's the one who found her the location for her store."

"He's got a pennant for every team in both leagues on these walls," Frank noted. "And those photographs of ball players are all autographed."

The rest of the decor, Frank noticed, was from the fifties and looked worn out. The black and white tiled floor was chipped and discolored, the booths upholstered in red plastic. He noticed they were ripped and lumpy.

"You boys hungry?" a booming voice called out from behind the stainless steel counter.

Frank turned around. The man who'd shouted was wearing a white shirt and apron. His graying hair told Frank he was about sixty years old. "Welcome to Rube's Restaurant," the man said, coming over to their booth. "No menus here. You tell me what you want, I'll fix it."

"Sounds good," Frank said. He introduced himself, then Joe and Biff. The three friends all ordered burgers, fries, and sodas.

"This is quite a collection of memorabilia," Joe commented. "Do you collect baseball cards, too?"

"Got a million of 'em!" Rube exclaimed. "Some worth a couple hundred bucks, most worth two cents. You a collector?"

"I've got a few," Joe told him. "I picked up a counterfeit Mattingly card in New York yesterday. You ever get stuck with bogus cards?"

"Not recently," Rube answered. "Every once in a while you'll hear about a bad card. It's a shame when it happens, especially when some young kid takes the loss." He wrote down their order. "The guy who knows all about counterfeits is Elliot Sanford Baird. He owns the Bayport Blues, lives in the old Larkin mansion on the edge of town. I hear he's got the largest collection of baseball memorabilia east of the Mississippi. A guy I talked to said the house is so full of stuff you can hardly walk through."

"We met Baird in New York," Frank said. "I had the impression that all the dealers had heard of him."

"He's respected, all right," Ruben assured them. "But there've been rumors that he's got money problems. Some say he's going to sell off part of his collection, maybe as soon as the big armory show this weekend."

Ruben finished taking their orders. "Hey, Justine!" he called.

Frank looked up and saw a waitress coming their way. "Yeah?" the woman responded.

"Get these fellows three sodas, will you, while I put their burgers on the grill?" Rube said, walking back to the kitchen after a quick goodbye.

Justine brought their sodas and, when their order was ready, came back with their food. "This hamburger's great," Frank called over to Ruben after taking a couple of bites. "We're going to have to come in here more often."

At that moment Frank heard the crash of cans in the kitchen. Ruben nearly dropped his spatula.

Justine screamed and ran out from behind the counter. "There's a man!" she cried. "A man in the kitchen!"

Just then the red-haired guy came rushing out of the kitchen, kicking restaurant supplies out of his way. He raced past their booth and toward the doorway. Before Frank could react Joe jumped up to follow the guy.

"Who was that?" Ruben cried out angrily.

"We'll explain later," Frank called out to the startled restaurant owner. He quickly threw some money down on the table as he and Biff jumped to their feet.

Out in the alley Joe quickly looked both ways and groaned in disgust. The red-haired guy had disappeared yet again.

But how far could he have gotten? Joe asked himself. He listened closely, but the noise from a garbage truck several blocks away dominated the street sounds.

Joe hazarded a guess that the guy would probably run deeper into the waterfront area, where there were more places to hide. As soon as he turned the corner away from Rube's, Joe felt a glancing blow to the back of his head. He staggered. Turning slightly, he caught sight of the red-haired man. He had a two-by-four in his hand.

"Now you've had it!" the man growled. Before Joe could recover, the man began to loop stout packing twine around Joe's arms, pinning them to his sides.

"I knew you kids would be searching for me," the guy said, tightening the knots, "so I hid out in the kitchen of that

restaurant. But when that waitress found me, I had to make a break for it."

"My brother's right behind me," Joe said, regaining his senses. He kicked out at the red-haired guy and connected with his shin. Yelping in pain, the man whacked Joe on the side of the head once more.

Joe collapsed in the alley. The man picked up the twine and wrapped it repeatedly around Joe's legs, tying them together.

Above the roaring in his head from the two vicious blows Joe could hear the hydraulic hissing of a garbage truck. The clanging and slamming of dumpsters being emptied echoed up and down the narrow brick canyon.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" the red-haired man said gleefully. He struggled with Joe, finally throwing him over his shoulder and tossing him into a nearby dumpster.

Joe felt himself tumble to the back of the steel container. The odor of rotting garbage stung his nostrils.

The crash of the closing lid deafened him, and the sudden darkness left him blind.

Joe struggled with the bindings. He knew he didn't have very much time. The garbage truck was moving closer by the moment. If he didn't get out of the dumpster - and fast - he'd be crushed to death!

Chapter 5

Counterfeiting Made Simple

Frank Hardy came racing around the corner just as the garbage truck lurched forward and connected with the dumpster.

"I know I saw Joe come around this corner," Frank said, staring at the garbage truck. "But where'd he go?"

The alley was a dead end. "There's no way out of here," Biff said, peering around the truck.

He's got to be around somewhere."

"Maybe the driver saw Joe," Frank said.

Frank led the way toward the truck. Biff followed close behind. Just as they got to the back of the truck Frank heard a loud clanging coming from the dumpster.

"Do you hear that?" Frank asked Biff.

"Yeah," Biff said.

"Stop!" Frank yelled.

The driver looked over at Frank in alarm. His hand was on the controls, and he was about to push the throttle on the crank that raised the dumpster into the truck.

Frank scrambled up on top of the huge steel container. "Wait!" he shouted.

Wrenching open one of the heavy doors on the top, Frank was horrified at what he saw. There, lying in a tangle of garbage and trash, was Joe.

"Frank!" Joe cried, his eyes wide with relief. "Just in time. I could have been landfill."

Frank quickly jumped down into the stinking refuse. He opened his pocketknife and cut the twine binding Joe's arms and legs.

"Are you okay?" Frank asked.

"Fine," Joe said, rubbing his wrists. "Except for the fact that I'm burning mad. That red-haired guy is starting to get on my nerves."

Frank was relieved to hear that Joe was all right. "Besides which," he said, helping Joe to his feet and noticing his brother's garbage-stained jeans, "he owes you some new clothes!"

The Hardys pulled themselves up out of the dumpster, and the truck driver made sure Joe was okay. He apologized several times and finally drove off.

As Frank, Joe, and Biff were walking back to their van Joe explained what had happened. "I don't know what scam that guy's involved in, but it must be something big."

"That's why I was telling Biff we've got to find out something about printing," Frank said, "and I think we ought to have a talk with Elliot Sanford Baird. He knows the baseball card business. Let's run over to Copy City now and see if they can tell us what kind of press might have printed Biff's phony card."

"They ought to know something," Biff observed. "I've heard that's the most up-to-date print shop in Bayport."

While Frank drove, Joe dusted the plastic screwdriver for prints. "I've lifted one thumb and a partial finger," he announced. "I'll give these to Chief Collig at the police department and see if he can match them."

"I remember when I used to collect stamps," Joe continued, "there were several extremely rare stamps."

"Isn't there one with an airplane printed upside down on the stamp?" Biff asked.

"Sure there is," Frank said. "The 1923 airmail stamp. One of those stamps would run six figures."

"How many baseball cards are worth that kind of money?" Joe asked Biff.

"There's a 1967 Tom Seaver rookie card that might bring a thousand," Biff said. "Then there's a Mickey Mantle rookie card that recently sold for twenty-four thousand. That's the exception, though."

There's also the Honus Wagner card, don't forget," Frank added.

"Oh, yeah. How could I forget?" Joe said. "That one's worth a hundred thousand dollars."

Several minutes later Frank steered into a parking spot near the front door of the print shop. "It's as big as a supermarket," he said of the brightly lit building.

Inside the air hummed with the sound of presses in the back and a bank of high-speed copy machines toward the front.

Joe led the group to the desk where customers could place their orders. A young woman in a red Copy City T-shirt with a badge that read: Adrienne asked if she could help them.

Frank placed the phony Mattingly card on the counter. "If a person was thinking about bringing out a line of sports cards," Frank said, "could your shop do this type of work?"

"Sure," the woman said. "Baseball cards are printed on five-color presses using twelve-point cardboard stock."

Adrienne opened a drawer and took out a combination magnifying lens and lamp. She held it over the card and looked at it closely.

"This wasn't printed on a conventional press," she said. "And it doesn't look like it was done on a color copier either. Whatever it is," she added, "it's very good printing."

"You don't recognize the process?" Joe asked.

"No, I don't," she admitted. "I'd say it's some new copier technology."

"What about the card stock?" Biff asked. "Is this the kind of stock used for baseball cards?"

"Does it seem right to you?" Frank asked.

"Have you seen this kind of stock before?" Joe asked before the woman could answer.

"Hey, one at a time, please." Adrienne tossed her hair out of the way and smiled at the three boys. "To answer your questions: Yes. Yes. And yes."

"Yes, this is the right stock for a baseball card," Frank concluded.

"Exactly," Adrienne said. Another customer came up to the desk, and Frank, Joe, and Biff stepped aside to let her help the man. The three friends thanked Adrienne and returned to the van.

"I've got it!" Joe snapped his fingers. "What about the guy who hired Dad to locate that stolen printer? He could probably help us out here. He might even be able to tell us if this card was printed on some new kind of desktop publishing system."

"It's worth a try," Frank agreed. "Didn't Dad say the guy's name was Newton?"

"Vic Newton," Joe confirmed. "And the company was Dupli-something."

"DupliTec," Biff said.

Within ten minutes the Hardys and Biff were headed toward the western outskirts of town, where DupliTec's Bayport offices were located.

"This is the new industrial park," Frank said as he turned the van into a large complex near a small airfield.

There it is," Biff said, pointing. "On the left." Frank parked in the tree-lined parking lot. They piled out of the van and headed for a door that had the company's logo stenciled on it. Just inside DupliTec's front door a receptionist asked if he could help them. Frank introduced himself, then Joe and Biff.

"We'd like to talk with Vic Newton," Frank told him.

He watched as the receptionist pushed a couple of buttons on his console, then repeated Joe's request.

A few minutes later a tall, husky man wearing a white shirt and red tie came through a door into the reception area. "Frank and Joe Hardy," he boomed. "Welcome to DupliTec! I'm Vic Newton."

Frank introduced Biff. Newton invited the three of them back to his office.

"Working with your father on my case, are you?" Newton asked when the brothers and Biff had been seated in his large office.

"Actually, we're working on a case of our own," Frank told Newton. He took the fake Mattingly card out of his shirt pocket and pushed it across Newton's desk.

"You collect baseball cards, too?" Newton asked in surprise. "I've got a little collection of cards myself, plus several autographed bats. I don't like to brag," he added, "but my prize possession is a pair of Babe Ruth's socks."

Biff was clearly impressed. "I'm the collector," he told him. "I bought that card yesterday at a show in New York."

I hope you didn't pay a whole lot," Newton said. "It's all bent up."

"I know," Biff said. "Someone tried to grab it away from me."

"Really?" Newton said. "How odd. People at those shows are usually a decent bunch."

Newton picked up the Mattingly. "This isn't a really valuable card, is it?" he asked.

"It would be worth something," Frank said, "if it weren't counterfeit."

Newton looked up sharply. "Counterfeit?" He looked at the card again, this time more closely. "Are you sure it's not a reprint?" he asked, opening his desk drawer. Removing three nine-by-six pieces of cardboard, he handed one to each of the teens.

"These are uncut baseball cards," Biff said, his eyes wide with surprise. "Wow. Even major collectors don't have access to entire sheets of cards."

"I don't understand," Frank said to the executive. "How in the world did you get these?"

"It wasn't terribly difficult," Newton said, a grin on his face. "I printed them." Newton shrugged. "I don't know whether or not to brag about this, but I bet I can print any baseball card ever made. Even your Mattingly."

Chapter 6

Collision at Home

Joe was stunned. He exchanged a look with Frank and Biff. Was Vic Newton printing unauthorized baseball cards?

"Is this great printing or what?" Newton asked enthusiastically.

"You're printing baseball cards here at DupliTec?" Joe asked, keeping his voice neutral.

"Not at all." Newton chuckled. "But I do print business cards."

Frank turned over the uncut sheet of six baseball cards. "That would explain the message on the back," he said. "'Let DupliTec handle all of your computer and desktop publishing needs.'" "

Joe and Biff found the same message printed on the backs of their sheets.

"I get it," Biff said. "These are your business cards, right? They're really good copies."

"Thanks. They were done on my new high-definition printer," Newton said proudly. "Come on out back to the lab, and I'll show it to you."

The three friends followed Newton through the DupliTec offices to the lab at the back of the building. Once they got there, Joe noticed that the laboratory was kept locked. Vic Newton took a key from his pocket and opened the heavy

door. He flipped a switch, and the lab was flooded with bright fluorescent light.

Frank spotted the printer immediately. It was completely compact and, with its matte black surface, almost futuristic.

"Sleek design," Frank commented.

"Kind of like something from a sci-fi movie I saw the other night," Biff said.

"There's nothing else like it on the market," Newton bragged, booting up the computer on a nearby table. With red, green, and yellow lights flashing, then burning steadily, the HD printer came alive.

"It's completing its initial checkout," Newton explained.

"This is what you printed those Catfish Hunter cards on?" Joe asked.

"Just watch," Newton said. He keyed in several commands. The HD printer's hum increased slightly in pitch.

Frank watched intently. From a slit in the side of the printer a sheet of cardboard suddenly emerged. The three friends found themselves staring at six fresh images of Catfish Hunter.

"That's amazing," Joe said, reaching for the sheet of cardboard. "Can you tell us what kind of printing system was used to make Biff's Mattingly?" Joe handed the sheet of fake cards to Biff.

Frank took the card from his shirt pocket and handed it to Vic. Newton studied the bogus card, holding it up to the light and examining it with a pocket magnifying glass.

Newton's eyes widened as he looked at Biff's Mattingly card. A frown came over his face.

"I don't like to admit it," Newton said finally, "but this could have been printed on my machine." Picking up an artist's razor knife from one of the tables, Newton took the sheet of Hunter cards from Biff and carefully scraped a corner of it. "If you look closely, you'll see that my printer overlays the surface with a microthin image."

Joe took the offered cardboard and looked at it under the light.

"May I use the knife on your Mattingly card?" Newton asked Biff. The Hardys' friend nodded.

"It's the same," Newton pronounced when he was done. "Either it was printed on one of my machines, or someone has developed a process just like it."

"How many of your machines exist?" Joe asked.

"There are four here, besides the one that was stolen, and one in our New York office."

"About the stolen printer," Frank said, frowning, "Our dad hasn't told us all of the details, but I'm assuming you think the theft was an inside job. Is there someone working here that you don't particularly trust?"

Newton sighed. "Your father asked me the same question. I told him that I trust every one of my regular employees. However, I do use a temporary service, a company called Hired Help. Who knows if one of the temps was involved?"

"It's possible," Joe said. "Can you get together a list of all the temps who worked here around the time of the theft?"

"Your father already has one," Newton said. "I believe he's been checking out all the names on the list."

Joe thanked Newton for his help. "We've got to find out where Biff's counterfeit card came from," he said, "and whether there are any more of them."

Newton looked surprised. "You kids should check out the card and memorabilia show that's going on at the armory this weekend. There's also a flea market tomorrow at the mall in Southport."

"That's right!" Biff looked excited. "I forgot all about those two shows. Maybe some other collectors have gotten ripped off, too."

"It's a shot," Frank agreed. He reached out to shake Newton's hand. "Thanks for all your help," he said.

"No problem," Newton said. "Let me know if I can help you out again."

Newton showed them out of the building, and the Hardys and Biff headed back to their van. Joe suggested that the three of them get together again the next afternoon to take in the flea market. "We might turn up something interesting," he said.

Frank drove to Biff's house, which was located in one of Bayport's newer housing developments. After they'd dropped Biff off Frank steered the van back out onto the street and headed for the police department.

"Let's drop off the prints from the screwdriver at the station, then head home for dinner," Frank said.

When Joe brought the fingerprints to the front desk at the station he asked the crime lab to process them as quickly as possible.

Frank and Joe were starved by the time they walked into the house and found their parents cooking in the kitchen.

"First order of business - raid the refrigerator," Joe said after greeting his parents.

While Frank and Joe snacked on cheese and crackers their father told them that Nora Shadwick, the owner of Pasteboard Palace, had just called.

"She wanted you to know she heard from Cecil Corbin at the card show in New York. It seems a number of dealers found they've got a few counterfeit cards."

"Do they know where they got them?" Frank asked.

"She didn't say," Fenton replied. "But she's waiting for you to return her call."

Frank and Joe then took turns telling their father about what they'd learned from Vic Newton at DupliTec.

It's entirely possible we're all looking for the same person," Fenton concluded. "I've gone through the names of those temps who worked for Newton. So far none of them has a record."

Joe thought for a moment. "What I wonder is why would someone who stole a high-tech printer bother counterfeiting baseball cards?"

"If you printed them by the thousands, there might be real money in it," Frank pointed out. "At ten dollars a pop, and

no one paying much attention to the cheaper cards, you could get away with it for a while."

"At least until the card seller is caught," Fenton added. "All you can do right now is keep investigating. Since I've got to go to New York again tomorrow, why don't you two concentrate here in Bayport? Ask around at the flea market. See what you find out."

Frank and Joe went into the living room. Joe put in a call to Nora Shadwick. He caught her just as she was closing up the shop. She sounded upset.

"Cecil called from the show late this afternoon," Nora told him. "He said he overheard a number of dealers talking about counterfeits."

"Could he tell if they were all talking about the same counterfeit card?" Joe asked.

"That's the horrible part," she groaned. "Cecil said the convention is flooded with bogus cards."

"What about the other cards in the lot that included Biff's Mattingly?" Joe asked. "Any more counterfeits?"

"You bet," said Nora grimly. "Corbin's pulling them out as we speak. There were at least ten Mattinglys, a Ken Griffey, Junior, Darryl Strawberry from when he was with the Mets. And more, I think. This whole thing just makes me sick," she said woefully. "You've got to find out who's responsible. It's schemes like this that ruin a great hobby."

Joe assured Nora that he and Frank would get to the bottom of the counterfeits. Just then he heard the signal on the receiver indicating another call was coming in. He said goodbye to Nora and took the other call.

"It's the police department," Joe informed his brother, signaling for something to write with.

Frank handed his brother a pencil and a notepad and watched as Joe wrote down a name. He also scribbled down an address in the waterfront area.

"The prints belong to a guy named Mark Wormley," Joe said, hanging up the phone. "He just happens to be redheaded, by the way. Two burglary arrests. And he's on parole. I've got his address."

"Let's pay a call to Mr. Wormley," Frank said, "right after we've eaten. Mom said we're having fried chicken."

After dinner Joe took the wheel of the van, and the two brothers headed downtown to the waterfront district.

It must be up there," Frank said, pointing at an old building. "Park around the corner."

Frank led the way into the dimly lit lobby of the rundown apartment building. "Doesn't look as if the maintenance crew's been here for several years," he commented as he kicked past a torn bag of trash.

"Wormley's on the fourth floor," Joe said.

Frank went up the stairs as quietly as he could, he winced every time he stepped on some debris and the sound echoed up and down the stairwell.

Placing a finger to his lips, Frank slowly approached Wormley's door. He listened, then knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again.

The door creaked and slowly swung open. Cautiously, Frank looked beyond the doorway and into the living room. The apartment was empty.

"He's cleared out," Frank said, disappointed. He scanned the few pieces of furniture.

"Check the other rooms," Joe said. "Maybe he left something we can use to find him." He headed for the bedroom while Frank sifted through some papers on the coffee table.

A scrap of ruled paper caught Frank's eye.

"What do you make of this?" he asked his brother as Joe came back out of the bedroom. Frank handed Joe the paper.

"I don't know," Joe replied. "It looks like a figure you'd use in geometry - parallel lines with a back slash."

"You're right," Frank said. "It's what they call a transversal. But is it a clue to anything? If Wormley drew it, was he just doodling?"

"That's another mystery for us to solve," Joe sighed. He took a last look around the apartment.

Frank led the way back outside, and the Hardys headed home.

"The living room lights are off," Frank said as they pulled into the driveway. "Dad said he was going out, but Mom said she was staying home. It's too early for her to be in bed. I wonder what's - "

"Look! Over by the garden!" Joe yelled. He caught sight of a figure dashing out a back door and through the gloom.

"Someone broke into our house!" Frank cried. "Don't let him get away!"

Chapter 7

Sniper Attack!

Leaping out of the van, Joe raced across the yard after the fleeing figure.

Frank hurriedly parked and ran into the house. The living room was pitch black. "Mom!" he called. "Are you all right?"

A light came on in the hallway. "I'm fine," Laura Hardy told her son as she emerged from the den at the back of the house. She was holding a baseball bat.

"Did you see the man?" she asked nervously, her voice quavering with fear. "I think he went out through the sliding glass door just as you pulled up. Where's Joe?"

He went after the burglar," Frank said. "I came in to see if you were all right."

"I'm okay," she said. "Go help Joe."

Frank rushed back outside. From the back of the yard Frank heard the rustling sounds of someone in the bushes. Frank raced toward the heavy foliage. At that moment a figure broke into the open.

It was Joe. "He got away again," Joe said disgustedly. "But I saw the guy. He had red hair."

"Wormley," Frank guessed.

"He didn't hurt Mom, did he?" Joe asked.

"She's okay," Frank assured his brother. "But we'd better see if anything's missing."

"He was in your father's study," Laura Hardy told her sons when they reentered the house. "I was watching television in the den when I heard something in the hallway."

Joe asked, "Did you see who it was?"

"No," she said. "He ran out before I could get a good look. I turned off the lights when he left the house so he couldn't see me inside."

"If he was in the hall outside Dad's study, he could have gone upstairs," Frank said.

"I'll check our room," Joe offered. "You see if any of Dad's records are missing."

Ten minutes later Frank heard Joe calling down to him. "Do you have Biff's Mattingly card?"

"The last time I saw it, it was on the desk in your room," Frank called back up.

"It's not there now," Joe said as he came bounding down the steps to join Frank in their father's office. "I bet Wormley broke in to look for the counterfeit card."

"I think you're right," Frank said. "Especially since nothing seems to be missing here."

Laura Hardy appeared at the doorway. Just then the phone on Fenton Hardy's desk rang. Joe picked it up.

"It's Dad," he told Frank and their mother.

Laura Hardy took the phone from Joe and spoke with her husband. She told him about the breakin but reassured him that everything was okay. After a few minutes she hung up.

Turning to Frank and Joe, she said, "Your father's in New York, following a lead on the DupliTec matter. In case you need to reach him, he wanted you to know he's staying at the Van Hooten."

Frank and Joe checked that all the windows and doors were locked. Laura called the police and, after she'd explained the details of the breakin, asked them to patrol the neighborhood.

"Now," she said, "it's time we all got to bed."

"We've had more than enough excitement for one day."

"I've been thinking," Frank said as he and Joe headed for the stairs, "before we run over to the flea market tomorrow, we ought to pick up the rest of the cards Nora Shadwick bought when she got the bogus Mattingly. Then maybe we can stop by Baird's place and show them to him."

"What for?" Joe asked, stifling a yawn. "We know the cards are counterfeit."

"We can ask him some more questions about the ins and outs of counterfeiting," Frank said. "The guy sure does know a lot about it."

"I guess you're right," Joe said, kissing his mom good night. "At the rate we're going on this mystery, we can use all the help we can get."

Eager to get started, Frank was the first one up the following morning. Right after breakfast he called Nora Shadwick and

Elliot Baird to make arrangements to stop by. As soon as Joe was up, Frank told him about the plans.

"Nora said she'd meet us at her shop," he said, pouring himself another glass of juice while Joe sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast. "Baird seemed happy to show us his collection."

Ten minutes later Joe was at the wheel of their van. After stopping to pick up Biff they headed for the Pasteboard Palace. Frank ran in for the cards, then hurried back out. Soon they were driving along streets in the wealthier part of Bayport. The houses on these blocks were large, made of brick and stone with lots of windows and chimneys.

"Baird's place sure is huge," Frank commented as they approached the three-story brick mansion. "It's pretty gloomy-looking, too."

Joe steered the van between the stone pillars and started up the curving drive. "Maybe it's haunted," he said. "You know, all those old baseball ghosts."

"Right," Frank said. "Actually, I heard somewhere that Baird bought the house from the heirs of the guy who started the Bayport Blues, way back in the eighteen nineties."

Joe pulled up in front of the stone steps and stopped. Shutting off the engine, he jumped down from the driver's seat. As they walked up the flagstone path Frank noticed that someone was staring at them from the glass pane beside the door.

Joe strode across the porch and pressed the doorbell button. The face disappeared from the glass, and a moment later the door was opened by a big man dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and a red tie.

When Joe introduced himself and his brother the man identified himself by simply saying, "Murphy." He stood aside and said, "Please come in. Mr. Baird is expecting you."

"That I am!" Elliot Sanford Baird said as he stepped in front of Murphy. "Welcome to the Haunted House of Cards."

Joe nudged Frank. "See? Even Baird thinks the place is haunted," he said in a low voice.

"Would you like something to drink?" Baird asked.

Before the boys could answer, he told Murphy to bring them three glasses of soda. Frank's attention was drawn to the confusing jumble of baseball memorabilia on the walls, in cases, standing in corners - in every available place.

"Wow! Babe Ruth's uniform!" Frank exclaimed in awe.

Baird smiled. "The Babe wore that uniform in nineteen twenty-seven. And the bat in that case over there was the one he used to hit his famous home run at Wrigley Field in nineteen thirty-two."

Frank laughed when he saw Biff's jaw fall open. "You mean that time he pointed to the right-field fence and hit it out of the park?" Biff asked.

Baird nodded. "That's right."

"Wow," was all Biff could say.

"How about this umpire's mask?" Joe asked, pointing next to the uniform.

"That was used in the final game of the forty-nine World Series. It's worth a king's ransom," Baird said. "One of my

most prized possessions."

Joe whistled. "This place is better than the Smithsonian," he said.

"Thank you," Baird said proudly, leading them from the hallway into the huge living room to their right. "But the time may come when I'll have to part with my treasures. Please, have a seat."

Frank sat on the edge of the sofa while Biff and Joe each took a seat in one of the large leather wing chairs opposite. Frank was dying to ask Baird what he meant by having to "part" with his treasures, but the collector remained silent. Finally Frank took Nora Shadwick's baseball cards from his pocket and handed them to Baird.

"We think these are counterfeit cards," he said. "Could you check them over and tell us if we're right?"

"I'd be glad to," Baird replied. "You know, this bogus card thing is out of control. There were rumors flying all around the New York show."

Joe asked, "Did you see any phony cards after you looked at Biff's Mattingly card?"

Actually, I did," Baird told them, a look of disgust passing over his face. "Some young boys had bought fake Mattinglys. And there were at least two Griffey's and a Strawberry that turned up."

Frank and Joe exchanged a look. Those were exactly the same cards that Nora had discovered.

Frank followed Baird over to his desk. Baird switched on the light, then removed a large magnifying glass from a drawer.

"Where'd you get these?" Baird finally asked as he put on his glasses.

"Nora Shadwick," Joe replied.

After studying the cards for a few minutes Baird said, "They're all fakes except for this Nolan Ryan." He handed the card to Frank.

"How can you tell?" Joe wanted to know.

"First the logo," Baird said. "Every card company makes its logo very difficult to duplicate. Hold on just a moment," he said, excusing himself.

The collector returned with several long, narrow boxes full of cards. He quickly found what he was looking for.

"Here's something you might be interested in. " he said, handing a card over to Biff.

"This is a Mattingly card!" Biff exclaimed.

Baird smiled. "And I'll let you buy it for exactly what I paid for it."

Biff hesitated.

"Which was ten dollars," Baird added. "I've got another one," he explained, "and I'll feel good knowing this one will be going to a serious collector."

Biff eagerly took out his wallet. "You've made me an offer I can't refuse," he declared.

Baird showed them the difference between the logos on the real card and the bogus one. He also explained that the picture on the front of the card shouldn't show through if the

card was held up to a light. Finally, he explained that the picture shouldn't be hazy at all.

"Counterfeiters have to take a picture of the card itself," Baird explained. "Then they blow it up and copy it exactly. That's why the photographs themselves are often hazy."

Frank made sure he understood exactly what to look for in a counterfeit and thanked Baird for taking the time to explain all the details.

"Are you fellows trying to find out where the bogus cards are coming from?" Baird asked them.

Joe nodded. "Nora Shadwick asked us to trace them."

"Well, I hope you catch the crook," Baird said. "If there's anything else I can do to help, I'll be right here."

Glancing at his watch, Frank told Joe and Biff they should be leaving. "We've got to be in Southport at noon," he said, "and it's a good hour's drive."

Especially if we take Shore Road," Biff added.

"That old road can be dangerous," Baird said, showing them to the door. "Especially after all the rain we've been having. I think it's even washed out in places, so be careful."

After thanking Baird for the information and the tour, Joe took the wheel again. Within minutes the three friends were driving south of Bayport. Out the passenger window Frank watched the waves crash against the rocky coast a hundred or more feet below road level.

"I'm not sure it was such a good idea to tell Baird which route we were planning to take," Joe said, his eyes on the

rear-view mirror.

"Why's that?" Biff asked.

"Only because we're being followed."

Frank turned around. A battered black pickup truck with darkened windows was some two hundred yards behind them. "Whoever it is seems to be speeding up," Frank said, frowning.

"You're right," Joe confirmed.

Joe pulled the van over as far as he dared. The black truck suddenly accelerated, then roared around the Hardys. The opaque glass made it impossible to see who was inside.

"Guess I was wrong," Joe said, watching the truck pull ahead.

"Maybe the guy is just in a hurry," Biff said, "but he sure does drive like a maniac."

Joe continued driving in silence until Biff said, "Play some tunes, Joe."

Joe turned on the radio and searched for a station that wasn't playing a commercial.

Just then Frank heard a loud pop. The van swerved.

"The front tire!" Joe shouted. "It's blown!" Frank watched his brother fight the wheel as the van swayed violently.

Suddenly there was a second unmistakable crack, then another pop. The van swerved.

"Somebody's shooting at us!" Frank yelled. Glancing out the front window, he saw nothing but sky and water.

"We're going over the edge!"

Chapter 8

A Hot Time

"Brace yourselves!" Joe shouted. As he glanced in the rear-view mirror to make sure no vehicle was behind him, his stomach lurched. He saw a car about thirty feet back, coming around a turn. But Joe had no time to spare.

He turned the wheel sharply away from the edge, doing a one-eighty into the opposite lane. The tires screeched, and the three boys, as well as everything else in the van, slid to the right as the van careened in a hairpin turn.

The driver in the car that had been behind the van hit his horn as he drove by, giving Joe a look that said, "Are you crazy?"

Joe pulled over and put the van into park, then let out a big breath of relief.

"Great driving," Biff said. "You pulled us through."

"Those were shots we heard," Frank said, an alarmed look on his face.

"Damage check." Joe set the emergency brake, and all three friends hopped out of the van.

"The shots came from up on that ridge," Biff said, pointing. He shook his head. "I never thought going to a flea market would be this dangerous."

Joe knelt down by the front wheel wells. "Both front tires are shredded."

Joining him, Frank examined a groove in one of the wheel rims. "Here's where one of the bullets grazed metal," he said. "I'd say from the size of this mark that the sniper must have used a high-powered rifle."

"There was a gun rack in the back window of that black pickup," Joe recalled.

"Let's get these tires changed, then go back to where we heard the first shot," Frank said. "Maybe there's a clue."

Joe took the full-size tire from off the back of the van. Frank had already removed the left front tire. After they replaced that one, Joe pulled a spare out from the back, which they put on in place of the other blown tire. Minutes later Joe started the van and headed back down the road, parking at a spot where the bluffs rose above the road.

"Fan out," Frank instructed. "Look for footprints, scraps of paper, anything that might have been left by the gunman."

Frank scrambled up an opening in the terrain. He made his way steadily toward the top.

"Over here!" he shouted several minutes later.

Joe and Biff came running.

Frank smiled as he pointed to footprints in the dust. "The sniper sat right here and fired at us as we approached."

Why didn't we see the truck if it pulled over for the gunman to get out and shoot?" Biff asked.

"Good question," Joe said. "I never saw it alongside the road." He walked to the edge of the bluff, which had eroded on one side. Looking down, he found his answer.

"There are the tire tracks where the truck pulled over. And I can tell someone has recently climbed up this way." Joe pointed to a trampled path of leaves and dirt.

Frank looked down at the road, then out over the cliff and across the bay. "I wish I'd paid more attention to his license number."

"I didn't catch it either," Joe admitted.

"If someone's trying to keep us from going to that flea market," Biff pointed out, "then that's exactly where we should be heading."

Frank nodded. "You're absolutely right," he said. With that he started hiking back down the hill toward the van.

"The Southport Mall is on this side of the city," Frank told his brother when they were back in the van.

Joe started up the van and pulled out onto the curving road, being especially careful to slow down when they came around bends.

"I think that's the place up ahead," Biff said, pointing at a large mall and parking lot at the foot of the hill.

Joe quickly found the entrance to the parking lot and cruised around until he located an empty space. The three friends hopped out of the van, and Frank led the way through the crowded lot to the nearest entrance.

Once they got inside the mall Joe was momentarily speechless, surveying the vast number of display tables. "Look at all this stuff!" he said, amazed.

The whole center of the mall was filled with tables. Jewelry, knickknacks, and clothing were on sale. Crowds of people were milling around the tables, checking prices and making purchases.

"I haven't seen any baseball cards yet," Biff said. "But if you want to buy a cheap set of tools, this is the place."

"Yeah, and there's a vendor selling homemade birdhouses," Joe said.

Finally Frank spotted a table loaded down with baseball memorabilia. He signaled his brother and Biff, and they made their way to the display. When he got there Frank noticed that the vendor had only old uniforms and equipment.

"I'm looking for a Mattingly card," Frank told the man behind the table.

"I don't sell cards," the man said. "Try another booth."

"This is great," Joe said, picking up a cracked and dirty first baseman's glove and pounding the well-worn pocket with his fist.

"It's still a pretty good glove," Biff said.

"How much?" Joe asked the vendor.

While Joe haggled over the price of the ancient glove, Frank kept moving.

At a table with old comic books, road maps, and outdated magazines Frank saw several notebooks filled with baseball cards.

"Looking for anything in particular?" a young woman behind the table asked him. Frank guessed she was about his age.

"A Don Mattingly baseball card," Frank said.

"What a coincidence," the girl said with a smile. "I happen to have just bought several." She looked through a large mailing envelope, then pulled out a card. It was in a hard plastic case.

"What'd you find?" Joe asked as he walked up. He was wearing his new baseball glove. Biff was with him.

The girl handed the card to Frank and said, "Near mint condition."

Frank examined the card closely. Finally he asked Biff if he could look at the card Baird had sold him.

"Do you think the card is counterfeit?" Biff asked in a whisper, handing his card to Frank.

The girl behind the table must have overheard Biff, because she exclaimed, "Counterfeit! Are you guys accusing me of being dishonest?"

"No, not at all." Joe was quick to reassure her. He smiled and stuck out his hand, the one with the new baseball glove. "I'm Joe Hardy," he said, and he also introduced Frank and Biff.

"My name's Erin," she told them. She hesitated, then laughed and shook Joe's glove.

"There have been some fake cards floating around," Frank explained. "Biff bought one by mistake in New York. Did you say you bought this card today?" he asked Erin.

"Not fifteen minutes ago," she replied. "Why? Is there something wrong?"

"What did the person who sold it to you look like?" Joe asked.

She thought for a moment. "She had blond hair, and she was pretty. Kind of tall. Really nicely dressed. She sold me five Mattinglys and three other cards. She said they were all presents from her ex-boyfriend, who told her they'd be worth something someday. But since she broke up with him, she decided to get rid of them."

"Weird," Joe said. "That's a strange gift."

Frank handed the two cards to Joe. "What do you think?" he asked his brother.

Joe held the cards under one of the gooseneck lamps on the table. "I think it's bogus," he said after a few moments.

"Let me see!" Erin demanded. Taking the two cards from Joe, she held them side by side under a light. "They look the same to me," she said.

"Look at the logo," Frank suggested. "It's not the same. And the picture is hazy. You can see the outline of the player through the back of the card, too. That's a sure sign that it's fake."

"I was cheated!" Erin said angrily. She emptied the mailing envelope. "What about the other cards? Did I get ripped off?"

Erin handed the cards to Joe. "They looked all right to me," she said in a pouting tone, "but so did the Mattingly."

"All the Mattinglys look bogus to me," Joe told her. "This Darryl Strawberry is also questionable."

"That's what they said when they traded him," Joe heard a familiar voice say. He turned to see Nora Shadwick standing behind them. "Hi, guys," she said. "How's it going?"

"I thought I saw a sign for the Pasteboard Palace across the way," Biff said.

"You've got a table here?" Frank asked Nora.

"I sure do," she said. "I saw you guys and came over to tell you that someone just tried to sell me another phony Mattingly. This time it was some blond-haired woman. I went to a light to check the card, and when I turned around to tell her I couldn't buy it because it was counterfeit, she was gone."

That sounds like the same woman," Joe said.

It sure does," Biff agreed. "But why is a woman trying to sell fake cards? I thought we were looking for a red-haired guy."

"We were," Joe said with a frown. "I mean we are." He paused for a moment. "Maybe they're working together to dump their phony Mattinglys."

"What I want to know," Frank said, "is why these counterfeiters keep pushing the same card. They've got to know someone's going to notice a lot of Don Mattingly cards floating around."

"Think of it this way," Nora explained to them. "You hit every dealer and sell ten or twenty of one card at a time. At ten dollars a card, that adds up. By the end of the day you could make several hundred dollars and not have worked very

hard. The next day you drop by another fair in a different place and do the same thing all over again."

Erin shook her head sadly. "And to think I got taken. I bought five of them, plus some other fakes. I thought I was getting a deal."

Joe asked Erin for her phone number. "I'll call you if we catch the guy," he told her, writing in a small pocket notebook. "If we don't recover your money, you can still file with the state for victim compensation."

"Thanks," Erin said breathlessly. "Thanks a lot. You guys are great."

"It's nothing," Joe told her, blushing slightly.

"Let's check out the rest of the mall," Frank urged his brother. "Maybe we can find that woman. If she's working with Wormley, he might be around, too."

Nora said she had to get back to work, and Erin told the guys she hoped they found the crook.

"Let's split up," Frank suggested when they reached a large atrium at the junction of the mall's three long shopping wings. "We'll meet over there at that fountain in fifteen minutes."

Joe took the left fork and was back at the rendezvous point a few minutes early.

"I didn't see either of them," Joe reported when Frank and Biff returned. "There weren't any card dealers down that way, either."

"I drew a blank, too," Biff said. "I saw some cards, but they all looked like the real thing."

Glancing at his watch, Frank said they'd better start back to Bayport. Once outside in the parking lot Frank led the group toward the section where they'd parked the van.

"Somebody's gas tank must be leaking," Joe commented, changing the subject. "I'm getting a strong whiff of gasoline from somewhere."

"There's the reason," Frank said, pointing.

See that puddle, right over there by our van?"

Joe stopped. "Frank," he said, "that puddle's under our van."

Suddenly, ahead of them a man stepped from between two cars out into the driving lane. His face was hidden behind an umpire's mask, and his hair was tucked under a cap with the peak turned back.

"This time you won't get away!" the umpire rasped. He held up something shiny in his gloved hand.

There was a clicking sound, then a flash of fire in the umpire's hand. The man had lit a butane torch and turned the flame up high.

"Watch out! He's got a torch!" Frank warned.

The umpire went into a windup, then hurled the flaming torch right at the pool of gasoline.

Chapter 9

The Long Arm of the Law

Joe Hardy sprinted into action. Realizing that he was still wearing the old baseball glove he'd bought at the flea market, he stretched out to make a diving one-handed catch. He snared the burning torch just as it arced into the spreading pool of gasoline.

"All right!" he heard Biff and Frank shout in unison. "I'm going after him," Frank shouted.

When Joe felt the torch slap into the glove's webbing he twisted his body, rolling on the ground away from the flammable liquid. When he was completely out of harm's way Joe shut off the nozzle on the torch. It sputtered and died. "Great catch!" Biff exclaimed.

"Let's get that guy!" Joe shouted as he picked himself up and brushed off his jeans.

Frank was already rushing through the parking lot. Joe couldn't see the guy Frank was chasing.

"Where'd he go?" Joe shouted to Biff.

"Maybe Frank lost him," Biff said, running beside Joe.

Sure enough, ahead of them Frank stopped dead in his tracks. Suddenly, Joe heard an engine roar to life nearby. He turned in the direction of the sound.

It was a black truck with darkened windows. Joe recognized it as the same one that had passed them on Shore Road.

The truck backed out of its space, jerked to a halt, then laid rubber as it rocketed toward the exit. Joe wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a passenger in the cab along with the driver.

"There he goes!" Joe yelled across the lot. He tried to catch a glimpse of the license plate, but the numbers were covered with mud.

Meanwhile, Frank and Biff had already seen the truck and were racing back to the van.

"We'll have to follow him on foot," Frank said when Joe reached the van. Frank was on his knees looking at the van's underside. "That guy punctured our gas tank."

Frank walked around the van, then, taking out his handkerchief, picked up a small object.

"It's a spike for putting holes through concrete," he said. "Gas tanks are made out of thick steel, but he could have punctured it with this." Frank put the spike into a small plastic bag that he took from the glove compartment.

Joe looked at the ground around the van. "The guy would have needed to use a hammer to get that spike through our tank. I don't see one around here, but we haven't checked the space where his truck was parked."

Joe jogged several rows away until he found the general area where he had seen the black truck. The space had already been taken by another shopper, but Joe was able to narrow the spot down within two or three spaces either way.

Looking around, Joe tried to see if the red-haired guy had left behind a hammer. What caught his attention instead was a small black square. It was lying right beside a parked car.

Joe picked up the piece of plastic, which turned out to be a three-and-a-half-inch computer diskette. There was a small white label on the diskette that said Home Run.

Looking around to make sure he hadn't missed anything, Joe tucked the diskette into his jacket pocket and headed back to the van.

"The guy also broke into the van," Frank told his brother, "but I can't see that anything's missing."

"If he used a hammer to drive that spike into the gas tank, he must have taken it with him," Joe said. "But I did find this." He showed Frank and Biff the disk.

"We'll run it through our computer when we get home," Frank said.

And just how are we going to get home?" Biff asked.

"We can call a garage for the van," Joe said. "Then we catch a bus."

Joe sprinted back to the mall and quickly called for a tow truck. Within half an hour a wrecker showed up in the parking lot. Frank and Joe made plans to call about the repairs later in the day. From the van they took their gym bags, which they always had packed for emergencies. Then Frank, Joe, and Biff made their way to the bus stop. As they were waiting for the bus Frank asked Joe what he thought the clues added up to so far.

"We know Biff's counterfeit Mattingly card isn't the only phony card around," Joe said. "From what Nora said, we'll probably find more bad cards."

"But even if they printed up several thousand," Biff said, "we're not talking enough money to buy a luxury sports car or anything."

"No," Joe said. "It's still a decent enough amount of money, though. You could make a living just by traveling around to all the shows and selling phony cards to every dealer you met."

"Wouldn't someone catch on eventually?" Biff pointed out. "People would start to talk."

Joe had to agree his friend was right.

"Maybe that's not the only thing they're printing," Frank said suddenly. "If they can print baseball cards, they can print other things, too."

"You mean, like money?" Biff asked.

"Exactly!" Joe exclaimed. "Or stock certificates, or -"

"Anything that uses the same printing process," Frank concluded. "We keep getting around to the fact that the stolen printer is a very important missing link. I wonder if Dad's making any progress on that end."

"Let's call him as soon as we get home," Joe said, checking his watch. "Maybe he's come up with a lead."

The bus stopped for the three boys, and an hour later Frank, Joe, and Biff were back in Bayport. Biff transferred to another bus that took him back home, and the Hardys walked to their house. As soon as they stepped in the door their mother greeted them.

"I'm worried about your father," she told the boys. "I tried to call him at his hotel in New York, but he hadn't checked in yet. That seems strange, considering he left last night. Where do you think he could be?" A worried expression came over their mother's face. "I have to take your aunt Gertrude to run some errands. Would you boys see what you can find out?"

Frank nodded. He and Joe headed straight to Fenton's office while their mother went upstairs to get ready to go out. Frank glanced at the answering machine. "The light's not flashing," Frank said, "so he hasn't called."

You phone the hotel," Joe suggested. "I'll look through his papers and see if he left any notes about what he might be up to."

Joe opened his father's desk appointment book - the one he kept at home so Frank, Joe, and their mother would know where he was when he was out.

"The desk clerk at the Van Hooten says Dad still hasn't checked in," Frank said, hanging up.

"Here's something," Joe announced. He read aloud from the appointment book. "To New York overnight to investigate Newton's former company - Transversal Industries."

Joe slid open the top drawer in Fenton's file cabinet. Leafing through the manila folders, he stopped suddenly and pulled one out. "Here it is," he said. "Transversal."

Frank looked over his brother's shoulder at the open file.

"It's a list of people who invested in Newton's first company," Joe pointed out. "Most of them have Manhattan addresses."

"Not that one." Frank pointed to one of the names on the list. "According to this, Elliot Sanford Baird invested in Transversal."

"Hmmm ..." Joe paused. "Very interesting."

"Hey," Frank said, "you remember that doodle in Wormley's apartment?"

"Parallel lines with a back slash." Joe snapped his fingers. "A transversal."

"If Dad's disappeared during his investigation of Transversal," Frank said, "and Wormley is connected to Transversal - "

"Then Dad could be in big trouble," Joe said, looking seriously into Frank's eyes.

Frank checked his watch. "It's late, but if we hurry, we can catch the next train and still be in Manhattan before seven."

Joe stepped into the hallway and called up the stairs to his mother. "Mom! Can you take us to the train station? We've got to get to New York!"

"It's a good thing we didn't leave our spare overnight bags in the van," Frank commented as they pulled up in front of Bayport's rail depot.

"I'm sure Dad's not in any danger," Joe assured their mother as they got out of the car.

"I hope you're right," said Laura Hardy. "But it's not like your father to forget about calling home when he has to go out of town."

"We'll get to the bottom of it," Frank said, waving goodbye. "Come on, Joe, we've got a train to catch."

Joe watched the bags while Frank went to buy tickets. Frank was at the counter when out of the corner of his eye he saw two men approach. One of them was a uniformed policeman. Frank instantly recognized the other as Con Riley of the Bayport Police Department. Riley had helped the Hardys out on a lot of cases, and he was normally in high spirits. This time, though, the detective looked anything but happy.

Con," Frank said, reaching to shake his hand. "You taking the train to New York?"

Riley held back, looking uncomfortable. "Unfortunately, no," he said. "And I'm afraid that you're not either, Frank."

"What?" Frank asked, confused.

"I'm going to have to ask you to come with us," Riley said, avoiding Frank's eyes.

"Do what?" Joe asked as he approached. "Come with you where?"

Con Riley sighed. "We'd like you to accompany us downtown," he said officiously.

"We can't, Con," Frank explained. "We're on our way to New York. Our father might be in some trouble there."

"You'll just have to wait," Riley said. "We got a tip you two are carrying counterfeit baseball cards across state lines."

"What?" Joe exploded.

"We received a call," Riley continued. "I took it myself. The caller said you'd be trying to leave town with your bags stuffed with counterfeit cards."

Frank stared at Joe, then back at Con Riley. "The caller," Frank said, "was it male or female?"

"If you must know, it was a woman," Riley answered. "She identified herself as being from the biggest baseball card company in the business. Now are you going to cooperate and come down to the station with me?"

Joe gritted his teeth. Frank, however, chuckled and told the police officer, "We're not carrying any baseball cards, but if you want to search our luggage, can't you do that right here?"

Detective Riley hesitated. He glanced at the uniformed officer. "I suppose we could do that," Riley said finally.

Then be our guests," Frank said.

"Here," Joe said, handing over his bag. "Check out my socks and underwear while you're at it."

Joe watched without interest as Riley carried his bag over to one of the benches. The other officer followed with Frank's.

Riley began rummaging through Joe's bag. "You two sure do travel light," Riley commented. Suddenly the detective stiffened. He looked up at Joe, then removed his hand from the bag.

"Sir," the uniformed officer said to Riley, "I think I found something."

"I think I did, too," Riley said, holding up a pack of baseball cards.

Frank thought there were about fifty of them, wrapped in plastic and sealed with transparent tape. He glanced at the cards in Riley's hand, then at a similar pack held by the uniformed officer.

"Let me see those!" Frank insisted.

"Please don't touch them, Frank," Riley said. "You know this is evidence."

"Evidence of what?" Joe exploded.

"Possibly dealing in counterfeit baseball cards," Riley responded.

"How do you know they're counterfeit?" Frank asked angrily. "You haven't even looked at them."

"Unfortunately, Frank, I've got probable cause," Riley told him. "First, someone reports you are in possession of counterfeit cards. Next, you deny having any such cards. Third, we search your luggage, and it turns out you do have cards."

Frank sagged slightly, and Joe's look of disgust turned to one of worry. Detective Riley opened one of the packs and fanned the cards.

A particular card immediately caught Joe's attention. It was a Don Mattingly.

"I hate to do this, guys," Riley told them, "but I don't have any choice. I'm placing you both under arrest."

Chapter 10

Hardball Pitcher

"You have the right to remain silent," Con Riley started to recite.

"Just a minute!" Joe interrupted. "There's an explanation for this."

Before the officer who came along with Riley could put his handcuffs on Frank, the older Hardy said, "Joe's right. We've been investigating counterfeit baseball cards ourselves," he explained hurriedly. "I think the cards you found in our luggage were planted."

"Our van was broken into at a flea market down in Southport," Joe said. "Nothing was taken, but that's probably when the cards were planted in our bags. We carry packed bags in case we have to stay somewhere on one of our cases."

Riley thought for a moment. "Are you kids telling me the truth?" he asked.

"Nothing but the truth," Frank said.

"Me, too," Joe added.

Con looked at the bag full of phony cards. The officer standing next to him shrugged. Finally Riley said, "Tell me exactly what the case is that you're investigating."

Frank quickly explained to Con about the cards and Wormley and what had happened at the mall earlier that day. After

telling the detective the whole story, Frank ended by explaining that he and Joe were going to New York to track down their father, who seemed to be missing.

"We think the stolen printer might be connected to the counterfeit cards," Joe put in.

Riley let out a deep sigh. "I'll have to keep these cards as evidence," he said, signaling the officer to collect the cards.

"I guess you're free to go," Riley said to Frank and Joe. "Just let us know how the case is going."

"Don't we always?" Joe said with a grin.

Detective Riley raised an eyebrow and gave the Hardys a sidelong glance. Then he and the officer walked out of the station.

"That was a lucky break," Frank said. "Let's run! We've got exactly two minutes before the next train leaves."

"No, Mr. Hardy hasn't checked in," the night clerk at New York's Hotel Van Hooten told Frank in response to his question.

"We're going to need a room here ourselves," Joe explained. "We'll take a suite so there will be room enough for all of us when our father finally arrives."

"Very good, sir," the clerk said. After the brothers had settled into their hotel room Joe called home to see if his mother had heard from Fenton. She told him she hadn't.

"We're going to start looking for him first thing tomorrow morning," Joe promised Mrs. Hardy. "It's too late now to do much of anything," he said, checking his watch and seeing that it was after nine o'clock. After saying good night Joe hung up the phone.

"Let's start with Transversal," Frank suggested. He looked in the phone book but didn't find a listing for the company. A call to information didn't get them much further. They got a number for Transversal, but when Frank made the call he found out that the line had been disconnected.

"Try DupliTec's New York office," Joe suggested.

"DupliTec is listed," Frank said, copying down the number. "But we'll have to find Transversal in an old directory. The library would have it."

"Good idea," Joe agreed, and he pulled up the covers on his bed, eager to get some sleep. "Wake me when it's morning."

Frank was awakened the next morning by the sound of a car alarm going off in the street below. He hauled himself out of bed, then roused Joe.

"There's no time to lose. We've got to find Dad," Frank reminded his brother.

After a fast breakfast in the hotel restaurant Joe and Frank hurried to the public library. They quickly found the reference room. While Joe checked the phone books Frank went to the nearest computer terminal to search for news articles about the company, Vic Newton, Elliot Sanford Baird, or any of the other names in their father's Transversal file.

"I've got an address," Joe said quietly, joining Frank at the microfilm viewer. "And get this. The old Transversal address is the same as that of the new DupliTec office. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Newton simply changed the name of his company."

"Newton might have had a long-term lease on the building," Frank said. "According to this article, Newton claimed to have an advanced printer technology when he set up Transversal."

"That's the same thing Newton claims to have now," Joe said.

"Only this time Elliot Sanford Baird is not one of Newton's investors. Baird put several million dollars into Transversal. When Transversal went under, Baird lost his money. I found an article that says Baird is suing Newton for ten million dollars."

"Why is Baird suing?" Joe asked. "People lose money in bad investments all the time."

"Baird is claiming fraud. The article says Transversal sold very few of the printers, and the ones that were purchased were returned because they didn't perform as advertised. Newton's lawyer admits that Transversal was too eager to get its product on the market, that the bugs weren't out of it yet. Newton insists there was no intention to defraud anyone. In the meantime, with all the Transversal printers being returned for refunds, the company went bankrupt."

"Dad's always been a pretty good judge of character," Joe said thoughtfully. "I can't imagine him taking Newton's case if he thought there was anything crooked about the guy."

"I can't either," Frank agreed, "but in the meantime, let's visit the DupliTec office."

Joe looked at the address Frank had written down. "We can take the subway," he noted. "Then we'll have to do some walking."

Frank nodded and led the way out to the street.

"If Newton's on the level, we're still left with the question of who might have stolen his printer," Joe said as they headed down the stairs to the subway.

"Not to mention who might have stolen Dad," Frank added. "Baird has a motive to steal the printer," Frank pointed out. "He believes Newton cheated him. You remember Ruben said he'd heard rumors Baird is going to raise money by selling off some of his memorabilia at the armory show this weekend."

"Printing phony baseball cards would be one way to raise a little cash," Joe said. "But if you're right about Newton's new printer being capable of counterfeiting all sorts of documents, why would anyone start with baseball cards? I mean, why not start right at the top of the list and just print money?"

Frank shook his head and went to the line to buy a token for the subway. "You got me," he said, "but that's exactly what we have to find out."

Half an hour later the Hardys reached DupliTec's offices. The building was located in a warehouse district right on the river. There were several abandoned piers across the street.

"Not exactly the high-rent district," Joe commented. Although there was a lot of traffic on the street, there

weren't many pedestrians at all.

"And this isn't the Ritz," Frank added as he looked at the corner building. The ground floor was occupied by a lighting fixtures shop, which was closed. Frank found a small sign above a door on the left side of the building. It read DupliTec Corporation. On the inside of the glass door was a notice announcing that the office would open next week.

Looking through the glass door, Frank could see a narrow hallway and an even narrower flight of stairs leading to the second floor.

Frank tried the door handle. "It's locked."

"Let's try the back," Joe said, starting down the side street.

Frank moved to fall in beside his brother, but Joe stopped short.

"What - " Frank started to ask. Then he, too, froze in his tracks.

Frank guessed that the man was no more than half a block away. He was wearing a nylon Cincinnati Reds jacket and an Atlanta Braves cap - with a bit of red hair sticking out from under the cap. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses. He was holding something in front of him, but Frank couldn't tell what it was.

"Careful, I think it's Wormley," Joe cautioned his brother.

"I think you're right." Frank began to advance. "Let's put some space between us."

Joe stepped off the sidewalk and into the street. Frank made the move to approach Wormley directly, and Joe took the

flank.

In a flash, though, Joe realized the man wasn't going to play their game. He turned toward Frank and moved his arm into a windup. Joe finally figured out what Wormley was carrying. It was a baseball!

At that second Wormley let fly a hardball that went skyrocketing in Frank's direction.

Joe knew his brother was pretty fast on his feet, but he quickly realized that the guy in the Reds jacket had a very mean fastball.

Joe Hardy watched, transfixed, then horrified as the ball caught Frank square on his forehead. It all happened so quickly that Frank never had a chance to duck.

"Ahhh!" Frank cried, dropping to the pavement.

Joe turned to sprint over to his fallen brother. Before he knew what was happening, a second fastball caught Joe in the neck, slamming hard into the space just to the left of his Adam's apple. The impact and the intense pain stopped him dead in his tracks.

He reached up to his throat, and as he did a red blur raced directly at him. Joe caught only a glimpse of the guy in the Reds jacket. It was Wormley, all right. And he was holding a baseball bat. Joe reached out to fend him off, but in his dazed condition he was too slow.

Wormley brought the bat down sharply on Joe's head. That was the last thing Joe saw before he crumpled, unconscious, to the street.

Chapter 11

More Headaches

Frank opened his eyes and found himself staring at a cement sidewalk, his head aching. As he slowly regained consciousness he felt as if it had swollen to twice its normal size.

Then he remembered Joe. Struggling to pick himself up, Frank saw a body lying in the street.

"Joe!" he called. But his voice was so feeble he could barely hear it himself. He tried again.

"Joe!"

Frank heard a groan. Struggling to his feet, Frank staggered out into the street. When he finally focused on his brother he saw blood on the side of Joe's head.

"Are you all right?" Frank asked, rushing to help Joe.

Joe groaned again, then started to get up.

"Never felt better," he gasped. He touched his head. Frank helped him to his feet.

"Let me get my bearings," Joe said, looking around and blinking several times.

Frank took out a handkerchief and wiped the blood at the back of Joe's head. "It was Wormley, all right," he said. "I only got a quick look at him, but I saw the red hair."

"That guy's in the wrong business," Joe said with a sigh. "If you put radar on that pitch, I bet it would register ninety miles an hour."

"If you're up to it," Frank said, "I think we should still try to get inside DupliTec's offices and look around."

Joe nodded. "I'm with you. Let's see if we can find a way in."

The Hardys walked around the front of the building. The iron gate covering the lighting store windows had been pulled back, and the sign on the front door read Open for Business.

Frank tried the door leading to the DupliTec offices upstairs and found it was still locked. He pointed at the lighting fixtures store. "Maybe there's a way into DupliTec through the store," he said.

"It's worth a try," Joe agreed.

As the two brothers entered the store a bell rang to announce their arrival. An old man in a blue workshirt came over to help them. While Joe distracted the man, Frank wandered through the store looking for a way into DupliTec. Finally he found a set of stairs that led to the basement.

He went back to find Joe and saw that the old man was back behind the counter, busy with some paperwork.

Frank quietly pulled Joe over to the basement door. Frank eased it open, and the two Hardys quickly disappeared down the stairs. Careful not to make any noise, Frank and Joe stepped down into the dusty cellar, making their way past dozens of cardboard boxes. Soon Frank located another door. This one led out onto the building's main staircase.

"We're in luck," he whispered, prying open a lock.

Frank and Joe slipped through the door, climbed up the main staircase, and quickly found themselves in front of the DupliTec offices on the second floor. There a high-powered security system greeted them.

"You spoke too soon," Joe said, grimacing. "We should have known it wouldn't be so easy to break in."

Frank stared at the keypad with flashing red lights. "We'll probably have three chances to get the combination right before the alarm goes off."

"Any guesses?" Joe asked.

"Probably six digits," Frank said, taking a deep breath.

"Or letters," Joe reminded him. "Try Trans," he suggested.

"That's too obvious," Frank said. He thought for a moment. "What about the date the company was started?"

Frank pulled out his notepad and found the date he was looking for. He tried the numbers, but nothing happened. The lock beeped twice, and the light still flashed red.

"Allow me," Joe said. He reached over Frank's shoulder and punched in five digits. The lock let out a long beep, and the light flashed green. Joe turned the knob, and the door opened. "We're in!" he announced with a triumphant grin.

"What did you just punch in?" Frank said, following his brother inside.

"Trans," Joe said smugly. "Nothing's too obvious when it comes to combinations."

"I'd say this place needs a lot of work before it's ready to open," Frank said once they were inside.

The office's reception area was cluttered with furniture and large cardboard boxes containing desk chairs and file cabinets. Lights on the receptionist's phone indicated it was hooked up. There was also a brand-new computer. Following the wires and cables, Frank could see it was plugged in.

"We want to check all of the rooms," Frank reminded his brother. "I'll start in the back."

Joe nodded agreement and, using a tissue to avoid leaving fingerprints, began looking through the receptionist's desk drawers.

Frank walked into a room that appeared to be Vic Newton's office. The impressive mahogany desk faced the door. Behind it was a high-backed leather chair. There was a window looking out onto a side street.

Frank searched the drawers, then flipped through the folders in a new four-drawer file cabinet next to the window.

The metal shelving next to the file cabinet was filled with different weights and colors of paper. Kneeling down, Frank saw the bottom shelf was stacked high with cardboard. It appeared to be the same type of stock used to print baseball cards.

What caught Frank's attention was the impressive computer setup covering a long table on the adjacent wall. The main computer unit was an upright tower with several drive slots and a number of light indicators, several of them digital. Connected to the computer was one of DupliTec's HD printers.

As Frank flipped the switch the monitor came instantly to life. The computer's operating system information scrolled past in a blur.

"Talk about fast," Frank said admiringly.

When the main prompt flashed on, Frank typed in a drive change and inserted one of the disks from the receptionist's desk.

The directory showed job application forms, tax withholding forms, and other business forms. On a hunch Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out the diskette Joe had found in Southport. He slipped it into the drive and typed "Home Run."

Frank found himself reading a list of baseball players' names. "Don Mattingly, Darryl Strawberry, Ken Griffey, Junior," he read aloud.

Using the system's mouse, Frank highlighted Don Mattingly's name. He clicked the mouse twice.

The darkened screen on the monitor burst into color and displayed a life-size Mattingly baseball card. It was exactly like the counterfeit one Biff had bought at the show, with the player in the same pose. Across the top of the screen was a menu of choices. Frank moved the pointer to "Print" and clicked the mouse twice in quick succession.

The DupliTec high definition printer whirled. Lights flashed. In another instant Frank saw a cardboard sheet of six full-color Mattingly cards emerge from a slit in the side of the printer.

Frank had his hands on the sheet before it could hit the tray.

"Joe!" he exclaimed. "You've got to see this." He hurried out of the office into the hallway and ran into Joe as he was leaving the back room in the office suite. Joe saw the baseball cards as Frank approached.

"These were on that disk you found," said Frank. "It worked perfectly in the HD printer."

"Wow," Joe said, his eyes wide with surprise. He took the set of baseball cards from Frank. "That means the person who had the diskette works on a system compatible with DupliTec's."

"Bingo," Frank said. "That person could be the same one who stole the printer from Vic Newton."

"You're right," Joe said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That the disk could have fallen out of Wormley's truck," Frank said, nodding slowly. "It would be too big a coincidence for the real DupliTec printer thief to just happen to be in the same area Wormley was in." He paused for a moment. "Did you find anything in the back?"

"Nothing," Joe said. "That whole area is being used for furniture storage, as far as I can tell. There are several file cabinets still in their packing cases."

"Wait a minute," Frank said suddenly. "I think I hear something."

"I think you're right," Joe said. "Maybe someone's unlocking the office."

Folding the sheet of Mattingly cards and slipping it in his pocket, Frank started down the hall toward the reception area. Suddenly he stopped and sniffed the air.

"Smoke!" Frank exclaimed. He rushed into the reception area. "The building's on fire!" he called, looking out a window and seeing smoke billow up from below.

Joe came running into the room and raced for the front door. He tried the knob and stared at Frank helplessly. "It's locked!"

"We'll have to go out the back," Frank said.

"There are bars on all the windows," Joe said, following Frank to the storeroom.

"Hand me that broom handle," Frank said, coughing. The smoke was filling the hallway and drifting into the room. "And close that door."

Joe grabbed the broom and threw it to Frank. Closing the door was a harder task. There were heavy boxes piled in front of it.

While Joe strained with the boxes, Frank tried lifting the window that led out onto the fire escape. "Some idiot's painted the window shut!" he cried out.

"Break it," Joe urged. "We don't have any time."

Frank smashed the glass with the broom handle. "Come on!" he urged his brother.

Frank swung his leg over the peeling window-sill and eased himself onto the fire escape.

Joe was right behind him. Slipping hurriedly out the window, he glanced back into the storeroom, which was filled with smoke.

"Frank!" he cried. "Look!"

Frank looked where Joe was pointing and saw the storeroom door engulfed in flames. Beside the door the box containing the file cabinets was rocking back and forth, almost hopping.

"There's someone in that box!" Joe exclaimed, ducking back inside the room.

"Joe!" Frank cried. "Stop! You'll get killed!"

Frank Hardy looked on in horror as his brother raced through five-foot-high flames toward the cardboard box.

But Frank got an even bigger shock when Joe managed to rip open the cardboard box and out fell Fenton Hardy.

Chapter 12

Fire Escape!

Joe gasped when he saw his father. Fenton Hardy was bound and gagged, his eyes were closed, and his face was white from shock.

"It's Dad!" Joe shouted. "He's unconscious."

With flames roaring all around him, Joe pulled his father from the crate.

Frank came running back through the room to help his brother. Hurriedly Frank ripped the gag from Fenton's mouth. Taking his pocketknife, Joe cut the bonds that held the detective's hands behind his back.

"I hear sirens," Frank said. "Somebody must have called in an alarm."

"We've got to get out of here," Joe said. "This old building will collapse."

Frank helped his brother half carry, half drag their father to the fire escape. The fresh air seemed to revive Fenton. Some color came back into his face, and he began to groan.

"Dad!" Frank shouted, slapping his father lightly on the cheeks. "Dad, can you hear me?"

"Wha - " Fenton blinked, then stared.

"Come on, Dad," Joe said. "We've got to go down this fire escape."

Frank and Joe put their father between them, holding him up under their arms. Slowly the three edged sideways down the fire escape, with Frank in the lead.

Joe heard the sounds of the fire trucks arriving out on the street. Footsteps pounded closer as a detail of firemen ran around to the alley to see if there were any people trapped in the back windows. The three Hardys were just reaching the ground when the crew arrived.

One of the firemen pulled the fire escape ladder to the ground and held it in place. Frank went down the ladder first, Fenton was next, and then Joe.

When they got to the ground the firemen quickly pulled them all to safety, away from the burning building.

"You kids saved my life," Fenton said, taking one of his sons under each arm.

"What happened?" Joe asked.

Before Fenton could answer, an emergency worker came rushing over to the three of them. The man, dressed in white, asked them if they needed oxygen or wanted to be taken to the hospital. Despite his condition, Fenton Hardy declined.

"All I really need," he said, "is a good breakfast and a decent cup of coffee."

Joe was relieved to see that his father was back to normal. "I think we'd better get out of here before someone asks us what we were doing in the DupliTec offices," Joe said, watching the firemen work to put out the flames.

"We passed a coffee shop on the way over here," Frank said.
"Let's go."

With that Frank led the way down the alley and toward the street. A few blocks later the Hardys found a restaurant. Frank held open the restaurant door for Joe and Fenton.

"There's a booth toward the back," Frank said.

After the three detectives had given their orders to the waiter, Joe turned to his father and asked, "What happened back there?"

"We knew you hadn't checked into your hotel," Frank added.
"But we had no idea where you were."

Fenton calmly took a sip of coffee. "When I got into the city I contacted a couple of people who had invested in Newton's first company."

"Transversal," Joe said.

"That's right," Fenton said. "When Transversal folded, all of them lost their money."

"Did you come up with any leads?" Frank asked.

"No, and it was getting late," the detective continued. "But instead of checking into the hotel, on a hunch I caught a cab and came down to the old Transversal office." He paused in his story when the waiter brought their food. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I was being followed."

"Did you see who it was?" Joe asked eagerly.

"Not until it was too late," Fenton admitted. "Newton had given me a key and the combination to the office. I let

myself in, but I locked the door behind me. I suspect the person who followed me has a key and the combination as well."

"Did you see who it was?" Joe asked.

"I know it was a woman, and I know she had blond hair," Fenton replied.

Frank and Joe exchanged a look. "That could be the same woman who sold Erin the phony cards," Joe said, quickly explaining to their father what had happened to them since they'd last talked.

Frank nodded in agreement. "It's a good possibility. What happened?" he asked his father.

"She conked me out," Fenton said. "When I came to I was tied and gagged and inside some kind of box. As far as I'm concerned, there's not much doubt now that we're all working on the same case."

"Where to now?" Joe asked, digging into his omelet.

Frank thought for a moment. "Doesn't Forest Rader have a shop in the city?" he asked.

Joe shrugged. "I guess so. Why?"

"Maybe we should stop by before heading back to Bayport," Frank suggested. "We can find out if he's seen any more bogus cards."

"Sounds good to me," Joe said, taking a bite of his toast. "What are you going to do, Dad?"

"There's one more name on my list of investors," Fenton said. "A guy named Keith Burke. I want to see if I can track him down. Why don't we all meet back at the hotel in time for the 5:07 train to Bayport?"

With that, Fenton Hardy went to pay the check. Frank finished his juice and stood up. "I'm amazed," he said to Joe. "Dad's just been stuck in a cardboard box overnight, and after a tiny breakfast he's right back on the case."

Joe looked at his father in admiration. "I know what you mean," he said. "The guy's an inspiration, isn't he?"

"You bet," Frank said. "Come on. Let's show him we know what it means to be a Hardy!"

When Joe opened the door to Baseball Diamonds Are Forever, Forest Rader was nowhere to be seen. Joe looked again, wondering if Rader was hidden in the gloom behind the clutter. There wasn't a space on the walls or on a shelf or in the glass display case that wasn't crammed with baseball cards and memorabilia.

"How would you ever find anything in here?" Frank asked, following Joe into the store.

"It's easy," came a voice from behind a curtain.

Forest Rader stepped out from a back room. "I simply remember where every item is kept."

"Amazing," Joe said. "The Pasteboard Palace is twice as big as your shop but probably doesn't have half as much stuff."

"Space is expensive in the city," Rader reminded the Hardys. "Besides, I think the clutter gives the place atmosphere."

Joe unfolded the sheet of Mattingly cards and handed them across the case to Rader. "Have any of these turned up in the past few days?" he asked.

Rader looked at the cards closely under a light. He used a magnifying glass to look at the logo and the photograph, then held the cards up to the light. "These look exactly like the bogus Mattingly card your friend bought," Rader said finally.

"They came from the same source," Frank said.

"Have you figured out who it is yet?" Rader asked.

"Not yet," Joe said.

Rader shook his head and made a face, handing the sheet of cards back to Joe. "I hope you catch whoever is making the counterfeits," Rader said, "and fast. More and more bad cards are starting to show up. As far as I'm concerned, this kind of thing really ruins the business."

"You said more bad cards are turning up?" Frank asked.

Rader nodded, turned, and removed a cigar box from a shelf behind him. "I bought these yesterday." He placed three cards face up on the glass counter.

"You paid market prices?" Joe asked, looking at a Mattingly card identical to the one Biff had bought. There was also a Strawberry and a Griffey.

"I got them from a kid," Rader said. "I lost money, but I wanted to take the cards out of circulation."

"Did you ask the kid where he got the cards?" Frank asked Rader.

"At the Southport flea market," Rader said.

Frank asked, "Do you have the kid's name?"

"No, actually I don't," Rader admitted.

Joe and Frank exchanged a look. Another dead end. "Have you seen other instances of counterfeiting like this in your career?" Joe asked.

Rader thought for a moment. "Once or twice. The counterfeiter has to know a lot about collecting. He needs accomplices, too. The same guy trading bogus cards would get noticed, you know?"

"Sure," Frank said. "How much money could someone make from counterfeiting?" he asked.

"Depends on how many cards you print and how much they go for," Rader said. "A couple hundred Mattinglys at ten bucks a pop, you won't get rich. But you will get out of debt!" he said with a laugh.

Joe thought about Elliot Baird and his financial problems.

"Speaking of which," Rader said, almost reading Joe's mind, "you guys are going to be at the Bayport Armory show this weekend, aren't you? It ought to be one of the memorabilia events of the year, what with Elliot Baird selling off some of his collection."

"You know for a fact Baird's going to be selling a few items?" Frank asked.

"I got it from a good source that Baird's having big money problems," Rader confided.

"Do you think Baird could be behind these counterfeit cards?" Joe asked.

"I didn't say that," Rader replied quickly. "I just think because of his being well-known in the hobby, he'd be in a good position to sell a lot of phony cards before anyone caught on."

Glancing at his watch, Frank thanked Rader. Joe said they'd see him at the armory show.

Out on the street Joe hailed a cab and told the driver, "Stop by the Hotel Van Hooten, then go on to Grand Central Station."

Traffic was heavy. By the time they reached the hotel, Joe saw Fenton Hardy waiting beside the front entrance with Frank's and Joe's bags.

Joe rolled down the window and called to his father. Jumping into the cab's backseat, Fenton told the driver to hurry. "We've only got ten minutes or so before our train." The driver nodded and pulled out into traffic.

During the cab ride Fenton told Frank and Joe that Keith Burke, the last Transversal investor, seemed to have disappeared without a trace. "But a banker told me that Elliot Sanford Baird was the major investor in Transversal," Fenton said. "He owned almost ninety percent of the stock. Baird lost the most when Transversal failed."

"That tends to confirm what we heard," Frank said. He told his father of the rumors about Baird's money troubles.

After they'd pulled up in front of the station Fenton paid the fare, and Frank asked the driver to open the trunk. The driver got out and walked around to the back.

Joe opened the door on the street side while Frank and Fenton stepped out onto the curb. Fenton went to collect their bags from the trunk.

Looking up, Frank saw a white limousine with darkened windows coming toward them from behind. It veered out of traffic, then accelerated.

Joe was halfway into the first driving lane, and the speeding limo was heading straight toward him.

"Joe!" Frank called sharply. "Watch out!"

With a roar the long white car turned slightly toward the right. The ornament on the gleaming chrome radiator grille looked to Frank as though it were actually aimed at Joe.

"Joe!" Frank shouted again.

Joe, concentrating on the luggage, looked up. He was only seconds away from being run over!

Chapter 13

The Man in the Leather Mask

Frank sprang into action. "Joe," he yelled, "look out!"

Joe had turned around just in time. The white limousine sideswiped the cab as Joe jumped back onto the curb.

Yelling for everyone to get out of the way, Frank raced onto the street to get the number of the limousine before it could disappear into traffic.

"My cab!" the driver yelled. "That clown hit my cab!"

Although Frank strained to see, the darkened windows made it impossible to tell who was inside the limo. The fact that the limo kept right on going didn't make identifying the driver any easier. Frank did manage to get the license plate number, though. He wrote it down in his notebook and walked back over to where Joe and Fenton stood on the sidewalk.

"I got the license," Frank told them above the roar of the traffic. He copied the number a second time in his pocket notebook, then handed one copy to the cab driver.

"Give this number to the police," Frank told the man, "when you call in to report the accident."

"What about you?" the driver wanted to know. "You're my witnesses!"

Joe pointed to the crowd standing around the cab. "Any one of these people can help you out. Sorry!" he yelled, running

to catch up with Frank and Fenton, who were already racing to the station's entrance. "We've got a train to catch."

Frank was up early the next morning. After eating a large breakfast he phoned the garage in Southport to check on the van.

"Should be done later today," the mechanic told Frank.

After hanging up Frank asked his mother if he could borrow her car. Laura and Fenton Hardy were still lingering over breakfast. They'd all been up late the night before discussing the case. Fenton filled them in on the names of the temporaries who had worked at DupliTec. He'd narrowed the list down to two women, Gina Lynd and Tracy Simon. Both had left DupliTec suddenly, right after the thefts. Fenton Hardy was going to continue checking up on both of them. Frank wanted to follow their most promising lead: Elliot Baird.

Frank went upstairs to rouse Joe. "I got us transportation," Frank told his brother. "Our first stop should be Baird's mansion. A lot of the evidence seems to point in his direction. He showed us his collection, but we really didn't get a chance to look around the place."

"If he lost all that money in Newton's first company," Joe said sleepily, "it isn't too hard to imagine him trying to get revenge."

"Very true," Frank said, pulling the covers off Joe. "But we won't know a thing unless you hurry up and get ready."

Joe went to shower and get dressed. Frank took the car keys his mother offered and told Joe he'd back out the car while

Joe finished his breakfast.

"If Baird's the counterfeiter," Joe said a little while later as he and Frank drove toward the Baird mansion, "and if the bogus baseball cards are made on the stolen DupliTec printer, how did Baird manage to steal the printer?"

"And how are Wormley and his blond accomplice connected?" Frank added. "Are they the brains behind the operation, or do they do the dirty work?"

"I'm sure Baird provides the brains," Joe concluded as they drove up to the mansion. "You know, it doesn't even look like anyone lives here."

Frank turned into the drive leading up to the front entrance. "You're right," he said. "Look at all the weeds. Baird's really letting the grounds go."

"There may not be anyone home," Joe said. "I don't see a car."

Frank pulled over to one side of the driveway and put the car's shift into park. He walked up the steps and pressed the doorbell.

Joe joined Frank. "Hear anything?" he asked.

Frank pressed the button a second time.

When the front door began to open Frank didn't see anyone at first. Then a scowling face appeared out of the gloom and asked, "May I help you?"

Frank recognized the man as Murphy, Baird's butler. "We're the Hardys, remember? We came to look at Mr. Baird's collection," Frank told the man. "We were here the other

day, but we didn't have time to see everything. Mr. Baird told us to drop by if we were in the neighborhood," Frank added, thinking quickly. If Baird wasn't home, he figured, now was a great time to snoop.

"He's not here," the butler said simply. "Mr. Baird won't return until later today."

"Mr. Baird is out of town?" Joe asked.

Murphy paused. "He had to go to New York," the man said. The butler pulled the door open wider. "You say you're the Hardys?"

Frank nodded.

"I suppose it wouldn't harm anything to let you come in and look around. Mr. Baird just acquired Bo Jackson's Royals uniform. It's one of the most valuable pieces in the collection."

Frank followed the butler into the hallway. The man switched on the overhead lights, then slid open the heavy oak doors leading into what he guessed had once been a parlor.

"The uniform is through here," Murphy said.

While Frank kept up with the butler and distracted him with small talk, Joe hung back and surveyed the hallway. Frank turned around at one point and saw Joe staring at a glass cabinet.

"Something is missing back there," Joe whispered to Frank when the two Hardys finally entered the parlor. Murphy was pointing out a white uniform with the number sixteen sewn on right under the Royals logo.

"What?" Frank asked under his breath.

At that moment the phone rang, and Murphy excused himself.

"I don't know," Joe said, answering Frank's question.

"Something. It's bothering me that I can't figure it out, but something is missing."

"I can't talk now!" Frank heard the butler exclaim in a loud whisper from the next room. Right afterward Frank heard the phone slam in its cradle.

"I'm sorry about the interruption," the butler said, returning. "That was a call from Mr. Baird. He told me to tell you to make yourselves at home."

Judging from how the butler had been speaking on the phone and the fact that Murphy had slammed down the receiver without saying goodbye, Frank doubted the butler was telling the truth. Even so, he pretended to believe him and said, "That's really nice of him. I think I could look at this collection for days. It would be a real shame if he had to sell it off."

Murphy gave Frank a blank stare. Joe was about to jump in when the phone rang again.

Looking extremely irritated, the butler excused himself again and went into the next room. He was back in seconds.

"It's for you," the butler announced. "It's Fenton Hardy."

"I'll take it," Joe said, and he hurried into the next room.

While Joe took the phone message from their father, Frank continued studying the treasures in the parlor.

"Thank you for showing us around," Joe said, coming back into the room. "But unfortunately, we have to be going. Our dad was calling to remind us about an important meeting."

Frank played along. He knew they didn't have any important appointment, but he also realized Joe was trying to find a way for them to get out of the mansion quickly. He, too, thanked the butler and then followed Joe out into the hall and through the front door.

"What's up?" Frank asked when he slipped into the passenger side of their mother's car. Joe took the wheel.

"Biff called the house," Joe said, starting up the engine. "He wants us to meet him down at Rube's Restaurant. Dad said it sounded important."

Joe shifted the car into gear and headed down the gravel drive to the street.

"Did you figure out what was missing from Baird's collection?" Frank asked.

Joe nodded. "On the way out I looked at the display case in the hallway."

"And?"

After Joe took a turn onto the street he looked over at Frank. "The other day when Baird showed us around his house he made a fuss about the umpire's mask on display in his hallway. He made it sound as if it was priceless."

"I remember. 'Worth a king's ransom,' Baird said, right?"

"Right," Joe said. "And remember that the guy who threw the burning torch in Southport was wearing an umpire's

mask?"

Frank nodded.

"Well, that glass case is empty." Joe paused. "The umpire's mask is gone."

Chapter 14

Striking Out

"You mean you think Baird's the counterfeiter," Frank said slowly. "You think he's the one who sent Wormley after us?"

Joe kept his eyes on the road but reasoned out the facts for his brother. "It could be. The mask is missing. Wormley was wearing one."

While Joe guided the car through the downtown area and headed toward the waterfront Frank was quiet. "What do you think?" Joe finally asked his brother.

"It's all so clear, and yet ..." Frank paused. "It's too easy. When Baird showed us that umpire's mask he talked like it was a national treasure. Even if we assume Wormley is working for Baird, I can't imagine Baird giving Wormley a valuable baseball artifact to use as a disguise when he followed us to Southport."

Joe realized his brother was right. He took a right turn and looked for a parking place. They were close to Rube's Restaurant.

"I guess Wormley could have bought an umpire's mask at any sporting goods store," Joe admitted with a sigh. He steered the car into a spot and shut off the engine.

"Don't worry," Frank said, reassuring his brother. "We'll get somewhere on this case, and soon."

"I hope you're right. So far it's been one dead end after another. If Wormley gets away one more time, he may not

come back."

Frank nodded. "I think we should plan to visit the Haunted House of Cards again tonight," he suggested, getting out of the car. "If Baird is responsible for the counterfeits, my guess is we'll find the stolen DupliTec printer right there in his house."

"Do you think Baird would admit anything if we pressed him?" Joe asked, holding the diner door open.

"Probably not," Frank said, "but he might slip up.

"You kids came pretty quick," Ruben Pierce said when the Hardys entered the diner. "Your friend was here. He stopped by for a soda, since he was in the neighborhood. Then he had to leave really fast. But he left you this note." Rube handed a slip of paper over to Joe.

Joe unfolded the note and read it aloud: "'Spotted Wormley. Am following. Will call.' It's signed 'Biff.'"

"How long ago did he leave?" Frank asked Rube.

Rube rubbed his chin. "Not more than five minutes ago."

"Did he drive?" Joe asked.

"I think so," Rube said. "He had his keys out."

"There goes our chance to follow him," Frank said. "You didn't see which way he went, did you?"

"Sorry, boys, I didn't," Rube said. "Listen, why don't you fellows have some lunch while you're waiting? Today's special is the hamburger deluxe."

Frank glanced at his watch. "It is getting close to noon," he said.

"We'll take two," Joe said, steering Frank to a nearby booth. Within ten minutes they were digging into two of Rube's delicious hamburgers. Not more than two minutes later the phone behind the counter rang. Rube answered it.

"Yes," Joe heard Rube say. "They're right here." Joe got up and headed for the counter. Before he could stop Rube the restaurant owner said, "Sure, I'll tell them," and hung up.

"Was that Biff?" Joe asked excitedly.

"It sure was," Rube announced. "He said to tell you he followed Wormley to the Bayport Mall. He said to hurry over. He's by the fountain, and he's got Wormley in sight."

Jumping up, Joe paid the check and caught up with Frank, who was already out the door and sitting in the driver's seat of Mrs. Hardy's car. Joe slipped into the passenger seat, and Frank drove off with a squeal of rubber. In just a few minutes the Hardys were pulling into the mall entrance and searching for a space.

"Hurry," Joe urged his brother. "Wormley's not going to sit by the fountain all day."

"I'm doing the best I can," Frank said. He swerved the car into a spot that a station wagon was just leaving, snaking a guy in a Mercedes who had been waiting for the spot. The Hardys rushed out of the car while the guy in the Mercedes leaned on his horn.

"He'll get over it," Frank muttered to Joe.

"We'll have to be careful we don't lose Wormley in the crowd," Joe noted while they made their way through the large department store that anchored one end of the mall.

"You take one side of the fountain, I'll take the other," Frank said as they entered the mall's indoor atrium.

As Joe approached the fountain in the center of the mall he caught a glimpse of red hair. Moving closer, Joe found himself looking straight at Mark Wormley. And Wormley, who had been preoccupied up to that moment, was staring right back.

Hurriedly Joe scanned the other side of the mall for Frank. He spotted him not more than fifty feet away, but Joe saw that there were a lot of shoppers between him and his brother.

Joe signaled to Frank.

At the same moment Wormley jumped up. Joe realized that Wormley had recognized him. But the red-haired guy was also gesturing to someone.

That's when Joe saw the blond woman. She was approaching Wormley from the same direction Joe had come. Wormley was trying to warn her away.

Joe sprinted toward Wormley. Seeing Joe start for him, Wormley broke into a run. People scattered, and the red-haired man knocked over one man and sent a baby stroller careening across the terrazzo floor.

On the other side of the mall Frank had seen Joe's signal. He also saw Wormley get up from the bench where he was sitting by the fountain. Then, in a flash, Frank saw the blond woman approach. Right behind her was Biff Hooper.

The woman saw Wormley start to flee and froze momentarily. It seemed to Frank that she didn't know what to do.

But Frank did. He raced over to her. "The police want to talk to you," he said firmly.

The woman stared down Frank with icy blue eyes. "You wish," she said with a sneer.

As the woman tried a fake to the left with a run to the right, Frank deftly grabbed her right arm. She tried to pull away, but Frank held tight. When he finally did relax his grip it was because Biff, accompanied by a mall security guard, had her boxed in.

"Hold on to her," Frank told the guard, "and call the police. I'll be right back."

Joe, in the meantime, found himself on the floor wrestling with Mark Wormley. He had Wormley's arm pinned behind his back and was listening to the culprit beg for mercy.

"I give up!" the red-haired man gasped.

"I see Wormley didn't disappear this time," Frank observed as he jogged over to Joe. "Biff and I caught his accomplice. The police are on their way."

"I'm not talking to any cops!" Wormley spat out.

"That's your choice," Joe responded. "But what you don't tell them, my brother and I can easily fill in."

Joe put some pressure on Wormley's arm and told him to get to his feet. Frank tensed, ready to prevent any fresh attempt to escape.

"Frank, Joe," a Bayport police officer said as he approached the group. He was walking with Biff and the mall security man. They were escorting Wormley's blond accomplice, who was wearing handcuffs.

"Your friend here tells me you've captured some counterfeiters," the man from the Bayport Police Department said.

"This is Mark Wormley," Joe told the officer. "That woman is his accomplice."

"Yeah, right," the woman said. "Try to prove it."

The police officer took Frank, Joe, and Biff aside. "The woman says her name is Gina Lynd, but she won't admit to knowing that red-haired guy."

Joe ran his hands through his sandy blond hair. "Officer, on several occasions that man and woman assaulted our father and both Frank and myself," Joe said, relating the central points of the counterfeiting case. "Even if they don't admit it, we're completely willing to press charges," he concluded.

Joe's speech was enough for the officer. He went over to read Wormley and Lynd their rights and took them both off in cuffs.

"That was great work," Frank complimented Biff after the culprits had been taken away. "How'd you happen to be following them?"

"Wormley was in the Pasteboard Palace," Biff explained. "I saw him try to sell Nora some baseball cards. She wouldn't buy them. I guess she figured out they were fakes. He left before she could call the police, so I followed him down to Rube's, where he had lunch. That's when I called you guys."

Then I tailed Wormley to the mall. I think he just came here to pick up Gina."

The Hardys said a quick goodbye to Biff, who was going to stay at the mall, and headed for home. Once they got there Joe called the garage in Southport. The mechanic told him the van would be ready the next morning.

After supper the Hardys headed back out, making their way to Elliot Sanford Baird's house.

Within twenty minutes they were in front of the Haunted House of Cards.

"Someone's home," Joe said. "His place is all lit up."

"Forget about breaking in then," Frank said.

"Why don't we just ask Baird point-blank," Joe suggested as they cruised up Baird's long, dark driveway. He parked the sedan just short of the front walk and got out.

"Ask him what?" Frank wanted to know. " 'Excuse me, Mr. Baird. My brother and I would like to ask you if you're a counterfeiter.' Like that?" he asked, making a face.

"We can be more roundabout than that," Joe insisted. "We know how to be subtle. Leave it to me."

Reaching the front entrance, Joe pressed on the doorbell. Murphy answered. "We'd like to speak with Mr. Baird, if he's in," Joe said politely.

The butler started to close the door but stopped when he heard the voice behind him.

"I'm right here," Elliot Sanford Baird told his butler. "Please invite the Hardys inside."

Frank stepped into the hallway past the scowling butler. Joe was right behind.

"It's been a long day," Baird said, reaching out to shake their hands. "I've got to return to New York again tomorrow for a few days. But you're welcome to visit." He ushered Frank and Joe into the parlor, then asked them to sit down.

"We won't stay long," Joe assured him, "but we had a few questions we wanted to clear up."

"I'll be glad to help you if I can," Baird said.

Frank began, "About your lawsuit against Vic Newton - "

Baird jumped up. "That is my business," he said coldly. "You know, I'm really rather tired, so if you don't mind ..."

Before Frank or Joe could apologize, Baird had pressed a button on the wall, and Murphy entered purposefully through a door at the back of the parlor.

"I changed my mind, Murphy. Show the boys out, would you, please?" Baird instructed the servant.

Joe felt the butler grip his arm hard. Joe was about to ask Murphy to go easy when his attention was drawn to the room from which the butler had entered.

There, on a large worktable, was a sleek black printer. Colorful copies rolled out one end into a tray. Unless Joe was totally wrong, it definitely looked as though Elliot Baird was the proud owner of a DupliTec high definition printer.

Chapter 15

Inside the Haunted House of Cards

"How much more proof do we need?" Joe asked Frank as they walked away from Baird's mansion. "The guy needs money. He knows about baseball cards. He invested in Vic Newton's company, so he knew about the HD printer."

"So?" Frank asked, opening the car door. "So Baird obviously got Gina Lynd or Mark Wormley or both of them to steal the printer from DupliTec," Joe concluded. "And he's been using them to pass phony cards. I bet Baird gave Wormley that umpire's mask after all. You saw what a cold shoulder he gave us - "

Frank put out a hand to calm his brother down. He started the engine and pulled away from Baird's house. "Take a chill pill, Joe," Frank said. "First of all, we need to be positive that the printer you saw is the same as the one stolen from DupliTec. Second of all, if you had a stolen printer, would you leave it practically out in the open so anyone who walked in could see it?"

"No," Joe muttered. "I guess not."

"There's a simple solution," Frank said, heading back toward their house.

"What's that?" Joe wanted to know.

"We come back when Baird's not there. He told us he has to go out of town again tomorrow. Let's come back then."

"Makes sense," Joe admitted. "And if it turns out the printer I saw is Newton's, we've got Baird."

"It certainly looks that way," Frank said thoughtfully. "In the meantime, we need to find out if it really was Lynd who stole the printer from Newton."

"Let's ask the chief for copies of Wormley's and Lynd's mug shots," Joe said. "We can show them to Vic Newton."

"Good idea," Frank agreed. "We can press charges while we're down at the station. Then let's get some rest. We've got a lot of investigating to do tomorrow."

Frank and Joe met at the breakfast table the next morning. Frank had already found out the van was ready and asked their mother to drop them off at the mechanic's.

When Joe was sitting down at the kitchen table with a glass of juice, Frank pushed a section of the Bayport morning newspaper across to him. "This armory show must be a big deal in the world of baseball card collecting," Frank said. "Full-page newspaper ads aren't cheap."

"Did you read the auction list?" Joe asked. "Half this stuff is from Baird's collection. The rumors were right about him selling off part of it." Joe scanned the list. "In fact, look right here." He handed the paper over to Frank. "The umpire's mask. He's going to sell it."

"That's one way to get rid of incriminating evidence," Frank said.

"On the way back from Southport we can stop by DupliTec's office in Bayport," Joe said, "and let Newton see the mug shots. I can't believe that both Wormley and Lynd refuse to talk," he added.

Frank shrugged and stood up. "Con can't make them," he said. 'They've both pleaded 'not guilty.' We'll just have to see how the evidence stacks up. Our testimony is going to be pretty incriminating."

Joe nodded and took his dishes to the sink. "Especially when we find out that there's a solid connection between Wormley, Lynd, and Baird. Let's go," he said excitedly. "I have a feeling today's the day we crack this case!"

Standing in DupliTec's Bayport office two hours later with Frank, Joe handed Wormley's and Lynd's mug shots to Vic Newton. "This man assaulted us several times," Joe explained. "We think he may be in on the theft."

"I'm sorry," Newton said. "I don't recognize him."

"How about the woman?" Frank asked. "Her name is Regina Lynd, and she worked for the temporary agency you've done business with."

Newton looked at the picture and shrugged. "She doesn't look familiar to me," he said. "Let me ask my secretary."

Newton called across the reception area to a young woman sitting at a computer. "Rose," he said, "would you please come here?"

Newton showed the woman the photograph of Lynd. "Does this woman look familiar?" he asked Rose.

"Sure, I remember her," Rose said. "She only worked a couple of days, and I wouldn't call it work."

"What was her assignment?" Frank asked.

"She was supposed to answer the phones and do some filing," Rose said, "but every time I looked up she was gone. She spent most of her time talking with the guys back in the lab."

"How soon after she left was the printer stolen?" Frank asked.

"You know," Rose said, furrowing her brow, "I think it was the next weekend."

Joe felt his excitement building. "Did Gina have office keys?" he asked.

"We keep them in the supply room," Rose explained. "It's unlocked during the day."

Turning to Newton, Frank asked, "Can you tell us the serial number of the missing machine?"

"No problem," Newton said. He checked a computer printout on his desk and jotted down a number on a piece of scrap paper.

Frank took the paper from Newton and thanked him for his time. "We'll get in touch as soon as we have any new information," he said.

With that Frank and Joe left DupliTec and headed back to their car. "If the serial number on that printer in Baird's house matches the one Newton just gave us," Joe said eagerly, "this case is solved!"

Late that night Frank and Joe were heading back to the Baird mansion. They'd spent most of the afternoon with their father going over the facts of the case. The police were still

questioning Wormley and Lynd in the presence of their lawyers, but they both denied everything.

The Hardys hadn't told their father where they were going, just that they wanted to take in a late movie. They felt it was better not to worry him or their mother.

As they drove Joe watched lightning streak across the sky.

"It's going to be a bad storm," Frank predicted. Thunder rumbled in the background, and rain began pelting the van's windshield.

"Better get our raincoats," Joe told Frank once they had parked the van on a side street near the Baird mansion.

Frank took the rain gear and a flashlight from a console next to the backseat and handed it forward. Joe slipped into the black jacket, then opened the van's door.

Joe silently led the way down the street and around to the front of the house. The plan was to slip through the gate, then head around the back of the house and sneak in through a ground-floor window.

"This place is so dark it doesn't even look like the butler's home," Frank whispered.

Finding the gate open, Joe slipped inside. Frank was right behind him.

"Keep low," Joe whispered, "and let's try the back of the house first. Maybe there's a window that isn't latched."

Joe reached the peeling, rain-streaked house first. He tried several side windows. Frank darted past him and went around to the back. He found a window that was being

repaired. The iron bars that had covered the window had been removed and were lying on the ground nearby.

Frank returned in minutes. He signaled to Joe. "I found a basement window," he said. Leading Joe to the spot, Frank eased open the window.

"I'll go first," Joe said around a crash of thunder. "Keep a lookout."

Turning around, Joe dropped to his knees and backed into the opening. Once inside he reached up and took the small flashlight Frank handed through.

Joe played the beam about the room and saw he was in a shallow basement with a dusty cement floor.

"All clear," Joe told Frank. "Come on down."

Frank caught up with Joe by the cellar steps. A gleam of light appeared under the door at the top of the stairs. Joe whispered, "I'm going up."

Quietly, one step at a time, Joe moved toward the door. Reaching the landing, he stopped to listen.

"I don't hear a thing," Joe whispered. He gripped the doorknob and turned it. He opened it just a crack, then stopped abruptly when the door squeaked.

"I'm going to open it fast," Joe whispered to Frank. "That should prevent the squeaking."

Joe steadied himself, then swept the door back in one swift motion. Except for the rush of air there wasn't a sound.

Cautiously Joe entered the mansion's back hallway. The light under the door had come from a bulb in a wall fixture. Aside from that lone bulb the hallway was dark.

With Frank protecting his back, Joe headed toward the front of the house. Within a few seconds he had entered the front entranceway.

"The printer is in the room behind the living room," Joe whispered.

Frank led the way into the living room, sliding open its heavy wooden doors. Lightning flickered outside, casting weird shadows about the room.

"This way," Joe said in a low tone. Moving swiftly to the door at the back of the parlor, he pointed to the floor. Bright light filtered through the crack between the door and the floor.

"Someone's in there," Frank whispered.

Joe pressed his ear to the door. "I don't hear anything. Maybe Baird just left the light on. Let's check."

Joe quietly turned the knob. Bright fluorescent light greeted them. The black printer sat on the worktable where Joe had seen it earlier. Next to it was a large high-resolution monitor.

"That's Mickey Mantle," Frank said, pointing to the monitor.

"Specifically, that's Mickey Mantle's rookie card," Joe said. "Biff said that one of those in perfect condition sold recently for twenty-four thousand dollars."

"From the looks of it, our counterfeiter is hoping collectors will think these are all in perfect condition," Frank commented. He picked up a piece of cardboard from the

tray at one side of the printer and handed it to Joe. The stock held six freshly printed cards.

"I can't believe it!" Joe exclaimed. "Baird will never get away with this. Six Mickey Mantle rookie cards!" He turned the cards over. "How'd he ever find the right paper? This feels like the right weight of card stock." Joe looked up at his brother. "It looks as if Baird was planning to move from a nickel-and-dime operation to the big time - all at once! Let's check the serial number on this printer," he said eagerly.

"I've got it," Frank told his brother. Taking the slip with the number from his pocket, Frank went around to the back of the printer and trained the flashlight on a metal plate where the number was engraved.

"Joe, this doesn't make sense," Frank said. As he stood up to tell his brother about his discovery he discovered something else. Joe was gone.

"Joe, where are you?" Frank asked. "This isn't any time to play around."

Frank hurried to the parlor. He looked across the room toward the hallway door. A light had been turned on.

"Joe?" he called.

Suddenly Frank heard a noise behind him. He turned quickly. What he saw was the business end of a Louisville Slugger.

And then everything went blank.

Chapter 16

"Ready, Aim ... "

The first thing Frank noticed was a throbbing in his head. The second was his brother's voice calling out to him.

"I hate to say this, Frank," Joe said hoarsely, "because I know it's not funny. But guess what - the butler did it."

"Murphy?" Frank said in disbelief. When Joe nodded, Frank asked, "You saw him?" He tried to reach up to ease the pain in his head, but he found that his hands were tied. So were his feet.

"Right before he beamed me," Joe said. "I've been working on these ropes," he added, "and I think I've just about got my hands free." Joe struggled against the rope, twisting his hands to put pressure on the loosened knots.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. Finding he still had his pocket flashlight, Joe located Frank in the darkness. After he got his legs free he hurriedly untied Frank's hands.

"Thanks. Now let's get out of here," Frank urged. "You know, while you were getting knocked out I was checking the serial number on that printer. We're not going to solve this case quite as soon as we thought."

"The serial numbers don't match?" Joe asked, turning to give his brother a puzzled look as they ran out of the room.

"The label on the back of the printer is stamped Transversal," Frank said. "The serial number is completely

different. My guess is Baird got that printer from Newton as part of the deal when he put his money into Transversal."

"But the baseball cards it was printing looked like nearly perfect copies," Joe protested, as he ran down the cellar stairs. "The Transversal printer wasn't supposed to work that well."

"I know," Frank said. "I don't understand it myself." He looked around for the first time. "Where are we?" he asked.

Scanning the room with his light, Joe said, "The basement, as far as I can tell."

Frank saw the room was huge, dark, and wet. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. "We've got to find a way out. Fast."

"I'll check the window," Joe said, jumping up. He returned in a few moments, shaking his head. "No luck. Murphy must have figured that's how we got in. He put the bars back over it."

With that Joe went for the stairs, dashing up two at a time. He quickly came back down to report. "The door's been locked from the other side. I hate to say this, Frank, but we seem to be stuck."

Frank tried to pick the lock but found there was a bolt on the other side that wouldn't budge. "Look, this place was built before cement blocks," Frank pointed out when he was back down in the cellar. "Sandstone is pretty soft stuff. Maybe we can dig our way out around that coal chute over there."

Joe looked to where Frank was pointing. The mortar around the coal chute was decaying. "It's worth a try," Joe agreed.

"Find something you can dig with," Frank said, getting up. He walked around the perimeter of the room and found a rusty chisel head in a corner. Using it as a trowel, he started attacking the mortar. Joe grabbed an ice pick and went at it, too.

Four hours later Frank was gasping from the effort of trying to dig a way out of the basement.

"It'll be daylight soon," he said, breathing heavily. "Murphy's probably long gone."

"Don't give up now," Joe urged. "Look, the chute's about ready to come out. Just a bit more digging."

When they'd finally punched a hole through to the outside, Frank found himself looking out at a foggy morning. Frank and Joe squeezed through the opening one at a time. The rain had stopped.

"We're going right back inside," Frank insisted once they were outside, standing in Baird's driveway. "I want to search this house thoroughly, and if the butler's still there, he's going to jail."

"Agreed," Joe said. "The garage is empty," he noted, looking toward the back of the property.

"Let's try the back," Frank said. "There's got to be a way in."

He and Joe jogged around to the back of the house. The kitchen door was locked, but Frank found the lock easy to pick. Soon Frank and Joe were back inside Baird's mansion.

"The house doesn't seem quite so spooky in the daylight," Frank commented as the brothers made their way back to

the front hallway. He slid open the heavy wooden doors leading to the living room.

"Look at this," Joe told Frank. He gestured at several cartons piled near the window seat in the living room. "I didn't notice those boxes last night."

"Let's check it out," Frank said, going over and opening one of the boxes. "Well, what do you know!" he exclaimed. Reaching in, he pulled out an umpire's mask.

"Do you think it's the same one Wormley was wearing when he threw that lighter at the gasoline?" Joe asked.

"I don't know," Frank admitted. "I doubt if we can get any prints from the leather, but there might be something on the wire face cage."

Joe looked in the box, then removed the lids from two more. "This is George Brett's batting helmet," he said, holding up the blue plastic hat.

"This has to be the stuff Baird is selling at the armory show," Frank said. "The rumors were right." Closing up the boxes, Frank walked through the living room and opened the door into the small room off it. There the monitor screen was dark, the printer turned off.

"Here's another surprise." Frank whistled. He handed Joe a sheet of six Mickey Mantle cards. "Read what it says down there at the bottom of each card," he instructed.

Joe looked closely. "Reproduction," he read. "That means these are meant to be copies."

"Obviously Baird's not trying to defraud anyone with these," Frank concluded.

"That means Baird's not a counterfeiter after all," Joe said.

"That's right," Frank said.

"But what about Murphy?" Joe asked, confused. "Do you think he's the counterfeiter?"

"I'd say he's involved in something," Frank said simply. "Otherwise, why would he have attacked us and tied us up? We just don't know how he's involved, or why."

"There's one way we can find out," Joe said. "Let's search his room."

After a quick tour of the area behind the kitchen Frank and Joe found Murphy's room up a flight of back stairs. Frank scanned the butler's room. The furniture included the bare necessities, nothing more. He rummaged through the dresser while Joe searched the nightstand and the closet.

Frank removed a baseball card price guide from the top drawer of the butler's dresser. Stuck inside the guide were three Mattingly cards.

"Jackpot!" he said, handing the cards to Joe. "Don't they look a lot like the card Biff bought?"

Joe nodded, holding a card up to the light. "You can see the photograph through the back, all right. And the colors on the logo don't look right, either."

"Check this out," Joe said, handing Frank a business form. "It's a written estimate from a body shop. I found it in the nightstand. It says there that our butler's real name is Keith Burke."

"According to this, he's got a white limousine that needs its fender hammered out," Frank said, reading the form.

Joe smiled. "What are the chances we're not talking about the same limousine that almost ran me down in New York?"

"About zilch, I'd say," Frank agreed. "But look at the address Burke gave the body shop."

Joe studied the form. "That's in New York," he said. "You know what else? It's the same address as Baseball Diamonds Are Forever."

"We've got enough evidence here to get the police to bring Murphy in for questioning," Frank said. "Let's get out of here before Baird or Murphy comes back."

"Good idea," Joe said, collecting the papers and leading the way out of Murphy's room.

Frank and Joe went down the back stairs and out the kitchen door, the same way they'd come in. Soon they were back in their van planning their next move.

"Let's stop off at home," Frank said. "We can check our messages and change into dry clothes."

"Sounds good," Joe said. "Maybe Dad has a lead or two. If not, I say we head over to the armory and try to find Elliot Baird. We've got some serious questions for him."

The Hardys finally pulled up in front of their house. It had been a long night. Laura Hardy was waiting in the front room and jumped to her feet when she saw Frank and Joe come in.

"Your father's at the station," she said. "He went to put in a missing persons report on you two. Where on earth have you been?"

Frank and Joe quickly reassured their mother that they were all right, then went upstairs to change.

Back downstairs Frank checked the answering machine and found Nora Shadwick had called.

"Guess what?" he said to Joe, listening to the message. "Cecil Corbin thinks he remembers who sold Biff the bogus card in New York."

"Oh, really?" Joe asked, buttoning up a fresh shirt. "Who?"

"Forest Rader," Frank said, smiling. He picked up the phone and punched in a number. "I want to clear up one loose end. I'll ask Vic Newton how it is that Baird has one of the old Transversal printers."

The receptionist quickly put Frank through to Newton. Just as Frank had guessed, Newton revealed that Baird had been given one of the Transversal printers as a part of his investment in the company.

"The Transversal printer looks a lot like the new DupliTec model," Frank said. "How different are they on the inside?"

"Actually, they're quite similar," Newton admitted. "Two circuit boards. That's it."

Frank thanked Newton, then called Biff. The Hardys' friend agreed to meet them at the armory. Frank tried to call Elliot Baird at his house, but there was no answer.

Half an hour later, after reassuring their mother that they were well enough to go out, Frank and Joe were heading for the Bayport Armory.

"You don't think Murphy would be stupid enough to try passing phony cards here, do you?" Joe asked, pulling up in front of the low brick building.

"Not if he knows we're on his trail," Frank replied. "He's got to realize by now that Lynd and Wormley have been arrested."

"How do you think Forest Rader fits in?" Joe asked. "Could he be helping Murphy pass the cards?"

Frank shook his head. "It's possible. Hey look," Frank said, pointing to a sign out front. "At least we'll have plenty of protection if something goes wrong. There's a guard unit meeting in the firing range."

Frank held open the heavy door. Joe entered the armory's large assembly room and glanced around. "This is a big show," he commented as he looked at the collection of memorabilia. More was being carried in and set up by dealers as the Hardys watched.

"Let's get the lay of the place," Frank suggested.

"I see Baird's booth," Joe said, pointing. Except for the collector's name card the table was empty.

Frank called Joe's attention to an arrangement of tables by a stairway in the corner. "There's Rader's booth," Frank said.

Heading over that way, Frank could see it was already stocked with cards, pennants, and posters. The cases filled with cards were locked.

"Maybe Rader's out getting breakfast," Joe guessed.

"Let's see what's downstairs," Frank suggested, leading the way. There was a long hall in the lower level with military-green walls.

"The guard must meet down here," Joe said.

Frank paused by a door marked Firing Range. Easing it open, he looked inside.

The room wasn't being used, but several lights were on. Thirty-five feet across the room paper bull's-eyes were suspended from metal bars.

"They can swing those bars in to change targets," Frank explained.

"More than a few of the guardsmen missed," Joe noted. "Look at all those holes in that wall back there." He gestured toward the unpainted wallboard behind the paper targets. As he went to look back at the firing line he heard a dull thud.

There wasn't time to find out what had happened. Before Joe could react he felt a solid object come down hard on his head. And then everything went black.

Joe had no idea how long he'd been out. As he raised his head and tried to speak he discovered there was tape over his mouth. And his hands were tied.

Joe struggled, then stopped. He could hear talking and shouting.

Then what seemed like a hundred tiny lights appeared in front of him. The light showed Joe how narrow the space was

in which he was trapped. Next to him, slumped unconscious, was Frank.

As he looked around the tiny dots came slowly into focus in front of him. Joe leaned forward, lined an eye up with one of the holes, and stared.

What he saw horrified him. Across the room stood ten men in khaki - guardsmen. And each one was shouldering an M-14 rifle.

Suddenly Joe understood. He and Frank were right behind the thin wall directly behind the targets. They might as well have been standing before a firing squad.

"Ready on the firing range!" called an officer sharply.

"Ready!" There was a pause, then, "Aim ... "

Chapter 17

Home Run!

In desperation Joe wrenched free one of his legs. He kicked the plaster wall with all his strength, expecting at any moment to hear the officer yell, "Fire," and then the sound of the deadly gunshot. He kicked harder and felt the plaster wall break apart beneath his feet.

"Don't shoot!" he heard the officer shout.

Joe kept kicking. By the time the soldiers reached the wall, he had opened a large hole.

The officer untied Joe's hands and pulled the tape from his mouth.

Immediately Joe began pulling Frank out. Frank groaned. He began coming to as soon as he was placed on the firing range floor.

"What happened?" Frank sounded groggy.

"Somebody thought we'd make good targets," Joe said. "And there's only one way to find out who." He turned to the guard officer. "If you wouldn't mind," Joe said, "just go ahead and fire away. We want the guy who did this to us to think his little plan was successful."

The officer gave them a surprised look but eventually nodded when he realized they were serious. "Okay, boys," he said reluctantly. "Ready on the firing line," he barked.

While the guardsmen were busy firing their shots, Frank and Joe raced down the hall to the stairs. Joe heard voices from the main floor. At that same instant shots rang out from the firing range.

"Hear the gunfire?" a voice asked. "That's the end of our problem." The speaker laughed.

Joe started quietly up the stairs. Frank was right behind.

The talk was muffled, then Joe heard a familiar voice say, "Wormley's a loser. After all the effort it took to steal the printer, he dropped it."

"It's lucky for him he didn't break the circuit boards," said a second person.

"You've got to admit," said the first man, "it's pretty slick the way I upgraded Baird's old Transversal model. There we are, printing counterfeits right under his nose."

"Once we get them right," said the second man, "there's nothing we can't print. Including money!"

As Joe turned to say something to Frank, Biff Hooper's voice drifted down the stairs.

"Hey, how're you doing, Forest?" Biff asked. "Have you seen Frank and Joe?"

"Haven't seen them," Forest Rader muttered.

Frank eased farther up the stairs. Straining forward past his brother, he saw Rader. Biff thanked him, turned, and walked away from Rader's booth.

"I'll keep an eye on them," Frank whispered to Joe. "You go call Con Riley. We're going to need backup."

Joe nodded. "After that speech we've got enough to put them away for a good while."

After Joe slipped back downstairs Frank decided to make sure of the second man's identity. Placing his foot on the last step, he pressed down on a piece of plastic. The resulting crack echoed like a gunshot.

"What's that?" Rader snapped.

Frank shrank back, but he was too late.

The second man was right at the top of the stairs. Frank found himself staring up at Keith Burke, Baird's butler. And Burke was holding a gun.

"Get up here!" Burke ordered.

Frank obeyed. Rader stepped around the side of his booth. He was also holding a pistol.

"Where's your brother?" Forest Rader demanded.

"He's around looking at the other booths," Frank replied. "He says he wants a 1960 Willie McCovey card. A real one."

"Find Joe Hardy!" Rader instructed Burke.

"Yeah, Burke," Frank said. "You and Wormley haven't done very well so far."

Burke was shocked. "How'd you find out who I am?" he asked, his face flushing.

"We not only have your name," Frank told the criminal, "but we know you're the Transversal investor Dad couldn't locate in New York."

Rader interrupted. "It doesn't matter," he barked. "Bring the other Hardy back here, and we better get their friend Hooper, too."

Burke hesitated, his eyes darting around the room. Frank could see the man was close to panic. Finally Burke hurried away.

Frank knew he had to play for time. "One thing we've been trying to figure out," Frank said, "is why anyone would want to counterfeit baseball cards."

The card dealer seemed to be mulling over the question. "I might as well tell you," Rader told Frank, "since you aren't going to be around to use it against me."

Wanting to learn all he could, Frank didn't argue.

"It's simple, really," Rader explained. "If we could print our own baseball cards with DupliTec's new printer, and no one caught on, we could also print our own Stanley Cup tickets - tickets to the Super Bowl, even cash."

"But someone caught on," Frank pointed out. "Your counterfeits weren't good enough to pass for the real thing."

Rader sneered. "It was just a matter of time. I've been reworking the system. We've gotten close to perfection, really close by now. The definition's there, and the colors are dead on. With you nosy teens out of the picture," Rader said ominously, "we'll be able to continue as planned."

"How'd you get the printer?" Frank asked.

"Regina Lynd got a temporary job at DupliTec in Bayport," Rader said. "She made wax impressions of several keys, then Wormley walked in one night and took the printer. I knew I should have gone in myself," Rader said, shaking his head. "Especially after Wormley dropped the printer. But we salvaged the new circuit boards and put them in Baird's old Transversal printer."

"What's Baird's connection with all of this?"

"He and Burke both invested in Transversal," Rader explained. "Only Baird never met Burke, and he doesn't know Murphy's real name. We were going to take another HD printer, but DupliTec installed the security system. So Burke took the butler's job to get access to Baird's printer."

"Pretty smart." Frank complimented Rader to keep him talking. "What about Wormley and Lynd?"

"They were supposed to do the dirty work," Rader continued. "I played baseball with Wormley in high school, and he needed work. I used him at the shop. Then at the New York show I told him you guys were detectives and to get that bogus card away from Hooper. Wormley blew it."

"I told him to scare you off. He attacked you on the train. That didn't work, but at least he got away. Then he tossed that plaster off the old building next to the Pasteboard Palace. That accomplished nothing." Rader shook his head. "Next he followed you down to Southport, and he even knocked you out and tried to burn you up in the DupliTec offices in New York. Again, a failure."

"It was Gina who attacked my dad, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Rader said disgustedly. "Mark's her boyfriend. She went with him to New York to follow your dad. She nailed

him with a baseball bat."

"If I'm not mistaken," Frank said, "they stole Baird's limousine to make the trip."

"They borrowed it," Rader corrected. "Baird was out of town, so Burke told them to take it. Burke tells me they hit a cab instead of you kids."

"Another fine miss," Frank quipped.

Rader scowled. Suddenly he jammed his gun in Frank's stomach. "This time we won't miss!"

Frank backed up, but from the corner of his eye he spotted flashing red police cruiser lights. The car was outside the armory's front entrance.

"I've got one last question," Frank told Rader. "Did you have any particular reason for selling the phony cards to Nora Shadwick?"

"I've known Nora for years, and I knew she would trust me. I also knew the colors were off on the logo of those cards, but I couldn't wait to find out if the cards could go undetected. I figured Nora wouldn't expect any bad cards from me. Cecil Corbin wouldn't know a bogus card if it hit him in the face."

Without warning Frank smashed Rader hard in the stomach. The other hand chopped free the gun. The weapon flew from Rader's hand, then clattered down the stairs to the basement. Rader started to run, but Frank grabbed him by the shirt and threw him to the hardwood floor.

"You're under arrest!" Detective Con Riley barked as he ran up to the fallen Rader. Three officers followed the detective.

Rader stood up slowly, then raised his hands. The crowd at the armory was frozen in place as they watched the action.

"Thanks, Detective Riley," Frank said. "Did you see Joe when you came in?"

"Negative," said the police officer.

Frank looked at Riley with concern. "I sent him to make that call to you. I wonder where he went."

At that moment Joe came up the stairs with Keith Burke in tow. Joe had Burke's arms pinned in a tight wrestler's hold behind his back.

"Look who I ran into," Joe said, handing Burke over to Con Riley. "He tried to jump me," Joe said. "And he even had the nerve to try pulling this on me," Joe added, handing over Burke's gun.

"Good work!" Frank exclaimed.

"Both you boys will be happy to know that Lynd and Wormley finally started talking," Con Riley said, watching his men cuff Burke and Rader. "In fact, when an officer told them we were going to arrest Rader and Burke, they couldn't start talking fast enough. I told your dad about what was going on down here. He's with them now, listening to them give their statement."

"They're not pinning it all on me," Burke said.

"Oh, yeah? Who burglarized our house?" Joe asked Burke.

"That wasn't me!" Burke insisted. "Wormley did that. And he's the one who pounded holes in your gas tank. Then he

went and lost the baseball card disk." Burke looked disgusted.

"What about the umpire's mask?" Frank asked. "It's gone from the case in the mansion hallway."

"Baird took it out," Burke said. "He's planning on selling it here at the show. I just lent it to Wormley."

"Enough chitchat," Con Riley ordered. "Let's get the bad guys downtown to jail where they belong." He prodded Burke toward the exit.

Frank and Joe followed. As they reached the door Frank saw Nora rushing up. Biff was with her.

"You did it!" Nora cried. "And the timing couldn't be better. Now there won't be a cloud hanging over the Bayport card show."

"I knew you guys could do it," Biff said, patting both his friends on the back.

"Well, look at that," Frank said. He pointed toward the entrance where Elliot Sanford Baird and Vic Newton had just stepped in. Frank saw they were talking together and smiling as they approached him.

"Fine work," Newton said to Frank. He shook hands all around. "Your father called me at the office. I wanted to come here and thank you two personally. I also wanted to find my friend Elliot Baird and settle our differences."

"Vic offered me a generous share of DupliTec stock," Baird said, "and I'm dropping my suit."

"Not only that," Newton said, "Baird and I have been talking. I've decided to put up the money needed to turn Baird's mansion into a museum for baseball memorabilia. That way, Elliot won't have to sell his collection after all."

"That's great!" Biff said with enthusiasm. "Now all the fans can see everything in your collection."

"Sounds good to me," Joe agreed. "But here at the show I've got my sights set on a 1960 Willie McCovey rookie card."

"Let's see if we can find one still in its wrapper," Frank suggested. "That way you get Willie, and I'll have my favorite thing about baseball cards."

"What's that?" Biff asked.

Frank smiled. "A stick of good old fashioned bubble gum, of course."

The End.